

BOOK 11

**The
Path
of Truth**

Bible Lessons for Youth and Adults

The Path of Truth, Vol I I

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Presentation

Welcome to this new year! By the grace of God, we finished the previous year; and confident in God's faithfulness, we move on. What will await us in the future? We don't know; but we can rest in the Lord. So, as King David said, we too can safely say: "The Lord is my shepherd; I lack nothing. He makes me lie down in green pastures" (Psalm 23:1). We know that the events that we are experiencing in our contexts many times overwhelm or are the cause of shock. But let's trust God; He has always been faithful!

In this issue of the Path of Truth, we will begin with the first quarter: "Knowing the Psalms." In this, the study of some of the most outstanding Psalms will be addressed. In the second quarter: "Characteristics of God's People", we will study various topics related to the characteristics of Christian people, such as compassion, civil government and the church, abortion, etc.

Then we will continue with the third quarter: "Victorious Spiritual Life: Philippians." In this, we will learn invaluable biblical principles that, when applied to our lives, will help us grow in grace and in the knowledge of God. Finally, in the fourth quarter: "The work of Christ in the believer: Colossians", part of the work of the Lord in our lives as children of God will be known.

Without a doubt, the topics covered in the lessons of each of these quarters will be a great blessing. Just decide to apply your heart to the wonderful Word of God. As you prepare for each study, allow the Holy Ghost to guide you first in your understanding of what it means to live a life of holiness, and then share it with the class.

It has been a pleasure to be able to work for our Lord God, and also to be able to serve you, through the exhaustive preparation of this material. We share that many hours were invested by the lesson writers, editors and the formatter. Today, grateful to God and on behalf of the work team, I have the joy of presenting you with the Path of Truth No. 11. We hope that this material will be a very valuable help in your personal study of the Word of God; and at the same time, a useful resource in your performance as a servant of God called to teach the Scriptures.

We wish you the richest blessings of God on your life and ministry. Remember the promises of the Lord; Anchor in Him. Whatever may come, never stop trusting God. Take the armor that God has given us; and pray fervently with all prayer and supplication for all the brothers and sisters. God wants to use you as a useful instrument in teaching His Word. Decide to join in God's perfect and blessed purposes for your life. You are in our prayers.

Patricia Picavea
Editor

Recommendations

Preparation and presentation of the lesson:

Dear teacher, as you know, good preparation is always reflected in the form and content of our classes. Therefore, it is necessary that you invest time in its preparation. And to help you do this, below we provide the following guidelines:

1. Pray, thanking God for the opportunity to teach His Word. This is truly a great privilege, a joy!
2. Cry out to God for wisdom and discernment in order to understand the Scriptures. There will be times when reading some of the Bible passages will be challenging. You may not have prior knowledge of the biblical context and other elements, but go ahead. You are on the road.
3. As you pick up the Path of Truth material, take an overview of the lesson you will teach; and then read the study passage (s) carefully in your Bible. From this close reading, take the lesson again and read it in its entirety (general information at the top, Introduction, development, etc.).
4. It may take approximately two or three days to study the lesson extensively. Study. Ready helpful materials like commentaries, etc. At the end of this part, have a notebook or a virtual file where you sketch the outline of the content of the lesson to be shared. Take into consideration the time available for your Sunday School class.
5. Set aside time to message your students, inviting them to come to class. In those, you can share an interesting biblical fact from the lesson. Example: "Do you know at what time in his life King David wrote Psalm 23?" We invite you to participate in this week's Sunday School class! The Lord and I will be waiting for you. You are very important to us."
6. Lastly, review the lesson; And if you think it would be helpful, you can even rehearse it as if you were sharing it in class. This will help you in your development since you are a teacher who is beginning in this beautiful work.

Basic parts of the lesson:

How to start a class? What do I say? What do I do? Etc. Surely, you're asking yourself questions like these at this moment or some time ago. It's helpful to examine the basic parts for the development of a lesson. Starting "head on" isn't recommended. We can make our classes monotonous and ineffective.

Let's next look at the basic parts of a lesson.

- 1. Start** (approximately 8 minutes). In this first part, and depending on your familiarity with the class group, you can take time to talk briefly about how the week went, and share with everyone. Then continue with a short time of prayer asking God for guidance; and continue with a motivating activity of Introduction to the topic. To be effective in this part, it is suggested to start with a question about a current event, a short video, the visualization of a graph or map, etc. This will depend on the topic; And in order to do so, you must let your imagination work. Initially, it may be difficult; but bit by bit, you will be able to do it effectively. Here are some examples of introductory motivational activities for the topic.

Topic	Introductory Motivational Activities
Lesson 9: "The model of prayer and fasting" (Path of Truth #9)	You can ask a volunteer, or all class participants, to recite the Lord's Prayer from memory.
Lesson 17: "Our social responsibility" (Path of Truth #11)	You can start by bringing up current social issues and then guide the class to see what the Bible says about our social responsibility as children of God.

Based on the activity you do, you can ask a short question that will give your students clues about what topic is to be covered in class. Then introduce the memory verse; and if you like, the objective of the lesson.

2. Development (approximately 35 minutes). In this second part, you must develop the study of the Passage to Study, relying on the Path of Truth and the outline of the lesson that you prepared. We suggest that during class you encourage dialogue, the presentation of ideas and collective work among the students. Optional questions are provided after each section. The idea is that this part of the lesson isn't to be a lecture by you as the teacher. The dialogue and / or participation of the students, will help them think through the topic. Take note of questions that had not been raised before, and you will generate a climate of trust among the students, and from them towards you.

Traditional education has focused a lot on the teacher, presenting him or her as the "expert" of the class or the center of it. And without realizing it, perhaps in Christian education, we have done it for a long time. But we certainly know that the one who speaks and teaches us is the Holy Spirit (John 14:26). And He can teach us by speaking through the participants of a class as well.

3. Conclusion (approximately 7 minutes). This last part corresponds to the application of the biblical truths learned to life, and to the presentation of the conclusion. For example, if the topic of prayer and fasting was covered, we can present students with a real life (or fictional) case to apply the biblical principles shared in class. This will help them not only remember the biblical intellectual knowledge, but also apply the biblical principles to their walk. Let us bear in mind that Christian education is knowledge of life. The Bible says, "But it isn't enough just to hear God's message. You have to obey it. If they only hear it, without doing what it says, they are deceiving themselves" (James 1:22). Let's help our students do what the Bible says.

Also emphasize memorizing the Memory Verse proposed for the Lesson. You can come up with creative ideas for students to achieve this.

After completing the Lesson, take some time to thank the Lord for what you learned. You can ask someone in your class to pray.

During the week, continue establishing communication with your students, encouraging them to apply the biblical principles learned. This is discipleship. Our work goes beyond Sunday. You have to make disciples; and for this, it is necessary to pray for the Word poured into the hearts of your students by the action of the Holy Spirit.

Welcome to this wonderful task of teaching the Word by making disciples of the Lord!

Mery Asenjo
Coeditor

Knowing the Psalms

First Quarter

Who Can Live In God's Presence?
God Continually Speaks To Us
Nature And Benefits Of The Confession
What To Do When Troubles Come
A Joyful Proclamation Of God's Faithfulness
The Confession Of A Great King
King David's Longing For God
Why Do The Wicked Prosper?
God Hears Our Prayers
God Is Our Refuge
Wise Advice Against Idolatry
Placing Our Trust In God
Praise And Worship God



Who Can Live in God's Presence?

Jorge L. Julca (Argentina)

Passage to Study: Psalm 15

Memory Verse: "Lord, who may dwell in your sacred tent? Who may live on your holy mountain?"
Psalm 15:1.

Lesson Aim: To examine the characteristics of the person who wants to live in the presence of God.

Introduction

The desire of every believer is to live in the presence of God. Everyone who has enjoyed forgiveness and God's grace fervently desire to live and enjoy communion with their Lord. That was also the longing of King David who was a great worshiper and who composed this psalm which helps us to reflect on the requirements of the person who wishes to enter and dwell in God's sanctuary.

Psalm 15 is considered to be a liturgical psalm. As people entered the temple or sanctuary it was either spoken or sung, alternating between the people and the leader. The pilgrims or a group of the faithful directed the questions about the requirements needed to be admitted to the holy place; and the priest or a Levite with much knowledge in the law responded with a list of "do's and don'ts."

It's worth mentioning that the study of this psalm is pertinent today, where worship occupies a prominent place in the life of the church. But this study can also be uncomfortable because it shows us that a genuine worshiper who seeks to dwell in God's presence is more than a spectator, and that worship is more than an experience. The study of this Psalm invites us to undergo a thorough examination of our consciences.

I. Worship as a Lifestyle (Psalm 15:1)

Psalm 15 keeps a didactic correspondence between the questions the writer asked himself at the beginning, with the answers he developed throughout the biblical passage.

If we examine this dynamic between the two questions (v. 1) and the ten answers (vs. 2-5), we find that the emphasis of the requirements for worshipers isn't merely external or liturgical matters that had to be fulfilled, but rather on the character of the person who worships. The implication is that rather than just strictly fulfilling rituals or requirements enabling us to dwell in God's presence, this psalm is an invitation to examine our hearts.

The Message, a modern version of the Bible, translates Psalm 15:1 as follows: "God, who gets invited to dinner at your place? How do we get on your guest list?" These questions could leave us with the impression that worship is an event, an occasion, a ritual in the life of the believer; even the use of the term "enter" into the presence of God could suggest a temporary state from which one will "leave" later. But it's more about remaining in God's presence, or living on his holy mountain. It implies a life of union with God.

Inhabiting, dwelling, living are terms that suggest permanence; that is, a continuous state. This shows us that worship isn't a transitory, ecstatic, quantum experience that must be faithfully fulfilled as part of the believer's rituals; but the worshiper must live in the presence of God in a permanent union.

In the New Testament, the apostle Paul in Romans 12:1 made a profound statement in relation to worship, when he wrote the following: "... Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship." What does this statement imply? The Pauline invitation refers to presenting ourselves, with our bodies, as an offering of worship to God.

The dualistic conception of Hellenic thought, so common in the world of the first century, didn't accept such a claim; because what it implied was the need to keep the body prisoner. In contrast, for Christian thought the best offering we can give is our entire life as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God. Following this teaching, there is no a difference between religious life and daily or secular life, as we usually call it. Our worship must be a lifestyle, 'where the rubber meets the road'. We exist to worship God, and live in communion with Him.

In Pauline thought, the offering isn't just composed of prayers, songs, money or resources that can be presented to God; but rather everything we are. The offering isn't something outside of us, but it's our own selves out of love.

Psalm 15 is so clear that it's hard to think that folks would miss its meaning, and at the same time, we must not neglect to examine ourselves in the light of its teachings. In verses 2 through 5, we find the characteristics of the person who dwells in the tabernacle of God and may dwell in his holy temple. It's important to note that the conditions to live in the presence of God, in response to the initial questions, are set by God Himself.

Some of these characteristics are positive; that is, they are linked to what a genuine worshiper should do as part of their Christian lives. And others are negative characteristics that are related to the aspects of the Christian life that must be avoided in order to enter into the presence of God. We will study each of them in the following points of this lesson.

Questions:

- According to Psalm 15, what is worship?
- Why is worshiping more than a conical experience?
- How can we worship God at all times as the Word tells us?

II. Positive Characteristics that should be Practiced in the Life of the Worshiper (Psalm 15:2)

A. Integrity in Your Lifestyle (v. 2a)

Verse 2 mentions: "The one whose walk is blameless..." Certainly, the word 'blameless' is a good term to start with. It's clearly referring to a life of integral holiness. This term is the same as that used in Genesis 17:1, when God told Abram the following: "... walk before me and be blameless." The meaning of the term refers to the divine demand to have a heart totally focused on God. In everyday understanding, the whole person is a person in one piece, indivisible, with pure motives and no double standards.

Integrity is a Christian virtue that distinguishes people who have consecrated their lives to God, evident in all aspects of their daily life.

B. Acting with Justice (v. 2b)

It's interesting that justice and integrity are presented as faces of the same coin. We would be mistaken in thinking that it's possible to be completely righteous inwardly without evidencing this fundamental characteristic in our relationships with others.

A righteous person is one who lives constantly in obedience to God's commands; and not only who meets them in sporadic situations. The Psalmist is calling us to carry out deeds of righteousness and justice. It's not sufficient to just talk about it, we need to act to become justice makers.

C. Speak the Truth in Your Heart (v. 2c)

The truth is intimately related to honesty, trustworthiness and integrity. If justice is related to the evidence of integrity in actions, truth is linked to the words and language of the worshiper.

These three concepts clearly establish the positive profile of those who will live in the presence of God as a people who live in integrity, demonstrated in their actions (justice) and also in their words (truth).

Questions:

- Why is it important for the true worshiper to demonstrate these positive characteristics in his or her life?
- How does integrity relate to working with justice and speaking the truth from the heart?

III. Negative Characteristics that should be Avoided in a Life of the Worshiper (Psalm 15:3-5)

In analyzing the negative characteristics that we must avoid if we want to enjoy communion with God, we're clearly called to be different in a world that has adopted these behaviors as normal and as part of the "modus vivendi" (way of life). In a society marked by extreme individualism where everything goes, and where respect and solidarity has been lost, the believer is challenged to be different and make a difference.

It shouldn't surprise us that this whole list doesn't refer to the cultivation of spiritual qualities exclusively, as if that were the secret to being close to God; but rather to deeply practical and everyday issues related to our relationships with others.

A. "Whose Tongue Utters No Slander..." (v.3a)

The life of a worshiper cannot be marked by the dissemination of stories or gossip that call into question the reputation of their neighbors. James affirmed the following: "... Anyone who is never at fault in what they say is perfect, able to keep their whole body in check." (James 3:2). He who dwells in the presence of God says nothing that could harm or injure other people in their character or physically. The comments and speculations in the disguise of spirituality greatly affect our neighbors; and they must be avoided at all costs in a life of communion with the Lord.

B. “Who Does No Wrong to a Neighbor” (v.3b)

A worshiper should avoid at all cost doing something which harms another person. Put positively, a worshiper will seek to do good to all, as the Bible tells us over and over. This is one of the distinctive aspects of a life of holiness which is reflected in love for others. The apostle John affirmed it in the following terms: “... For whoever doesn't love their brother and sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they haven't seen” (1 John 4:20).

C. “Casts No Slur on Others” (v.3c)

This aspect refers to collecting comments about others, accumulating and publishing them regardless of the effect it might cause or the truthfulness of the comment. True worshipers don't speak ill of their friends.” Adam Clarke explains that the word *cherpah* that is translated here as “slur,” which means “to strip, undress, take someone's clothes off” (Commentary on the Holy Bible. USA: CNP, 1974, p.45).

A worshiper who seeks to honor God doesn't make comments that hurt others, and when they hear negative comments about other people, they stop the chain of gossip.

D. “Who Despises a Vile Person but Honors Those Who Fear the Lord” (v.4a)

This negative characteristic that should be avoided is to remain silent when someone is doing something that is really wrong; becoming an accomplice in their sins. We must take a stand against sin and be uncompromising with those who deliberately practice sin.

A worshiper is a defender of righteousness, who faithfully honors the Lord, regardless of their social position. They become intolerant of those who mock God, and are blatant sinners, or reprobates. A worshiper with this characteristic becomes an ally of God, and shows solidarity with his message of holiness.

E. “Who Keeps an Oath Even When It Hurts, and doesn't Change Their Mind” (v.4b)

Worshipers who long to live in the presence of God are characterized by their words, which carry more weight than any written document. They fulfill with responsibility their promises; and in this way honor their words, even if this harms them in some way. This is also relevant to our days, where the violation of covenants is becoming more common, and where the promises of yesteryear that our ancestors left us as a legacy have fallen into disuse and mockery.

F. “Who lends money to the poor without interest;” (v.5a)

The internet dictionary defines usury as: “the illegal action or practice of lending money at unreasonably high rates of interest” (Google.com/search-

definition+of+usury).

Worshiper don't take advantage of the need or misfortune of others to enrich themselves; but they consider the other as their own brother or sister and seek to help them. This may mean lending money or any kind of help without demanding excessive interest; but according to the possibilities of the needy person.

G. “Who doesn't Accept a Bribe Against the Innocent” (v.5b)

In times of widespread corruption in our society, how pertinent it's to reflect on this characteristic which we need to avoid if we want to live in God's presence. Bribery means giving someone money to get something illegally or harming an innocent in their cause.

It seems that in our generation this illegal practice has been normalized by avoiding fines or expediting administrative processes; But those who want to worship God and live in His presence are called to walk the honest path, even if that implies many times delaying procedures or even being harmed by the officials for trying to live fairly.

The final statement of Psalm 15 states that “Whoever does these things will never be shaken. This is the answer to the initial questions and an invitation to self-examination for those of us who study this passage. Who would not want to live without ever slipping? We're called to act; the demands we find in the Bible are very high. If God says in His word that this is His plan, then it means that it's possible to live under these ethical standards.

Questions:

- Do you consider that there is a relationship between the life of worship and our call to Christian holiness? Comment.
- Do you consider that you could live in the presence of God without having a life totally devoted to Him, and without loving your neighbor? Comment.

Conclusion

Psalm 15 teaches us what a worshiper who truly is seeking to live in the presence of God would look like. To live near to God isn't just about fulfilling a list of ethical norms. The desire to dwell in the house of God speaks of worship as a way of life in permanent communion with our Creator. There is no place for separation between the act of worship and the life of the worshiper; but rather a perfect harmony.

Likewise, all the characteristics mentioned in this psalm link the character of the worshipers' lives with a call to a life of holiness, which is constantly reflected in interpersonal relationships with their neighbors.



God Continually Speaks to Us

Déborra Acuña (Chile)

Passage to Study: Psalm 19

Memory Verse: “The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands.” Psalm 19:1

Lesson Aim: To understand that God communicates and reveals Himself in different ways, so that we can see, feel and hear Him every day.

Introduction

When we read this beautiful song written by King David, in which he exalts God for His revelation to us, and as we meditate deeply on the content, we can realize the beauty of our creative God, the greatness of His work, and how His efforts to restore us are constantly reflected in His Word and in His creation. C.S. Lewis, writer and creator of *The Chronicles of Narnia*, said, “This is the greatest poem in the Psalter and one of the best lyrics in the world.” (C. S. Lewis. *Reflections on the Psalms* New York: Harper One, 1958, pp. 73.) This psalm is one of the most profound Jewish prayers. The Jews still recite this Psalm 19 in their morning prayers, weddings and other festivities in order to exalt God and ask Him for wisdom.

Before studying this passage, we need to remember that God’s Word is still powerful. So, what we read in it, although it was written many years ago, is now a message for our lives; For it’s the Word of God spoken today, by the same author, to us, his people: “the word of God is alive and active...” (Hebrews 4:12).

If we read Psalm 19 carefully, we can see that although the psalm exalts the greatness of God demonstrated through His creation, in fact, the psalm shows us that He reveals himself to us in two ways: through His creation and through His law. Everything He has created has a purpose and a message that reflects His love and greatness.

I. God Reveals Himself to Us Through His Creation (Psalm 19:1-6)

Read Psalm 19:1-6, and then ask your students when was the last time they stopped for a moment to contemplate the heavens. If you wish, you can comment on the answers they provide.

On February 27, 2010 we had a strong earthquake in Chile; and as a result, we were without basic supplies for several days; electricity was one of them. After a few

days, while I realized how much the moon and stars shone during the night, I said to my husband in a moment of inspiration: “When the lights of man go out, you can see the lights of God”. The lighting of houses, courtyards and the street lighting had not allowed me to see the beauty of the night sky; but at that moment, I realized that the lights that God had created were enough to illuminate everything. I was able to meditate on God’s greatness and praise him, because despite the difficult circumstances in which we were in, He showed us that He was there.

Let’s look at some important points of Psalm 19:1-6:

A. The Message of the Heavens

By reading these verses, we can see that God is an artist. Just as painters have their techniques that distinguish them from the rest, and they put their signature on one side of their artistic work, God has signed His work, giving it His seal of majesty, greatness and perfection. The skies above us are full of traces that point to the Creator. This indescribable work of art is a clear and evident statement of the existence of God. There is no art work without a painter. God’s amazing creation which He has signed show us that He exists and is powerful. Likewise, even though we only see a small part of His creation, it enables us to recognize Him to be the only Creator.

God’s greatness doesn’t depend on what we believe. Such divine greatness is an obvious truth, revealed by God. Romans 1:19 says: “since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them.” So the greatness of the Lord isn’t something invisible; but it’s in sight of all, it’s part of what He wanted to reveal to us. “...since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse” (Romans 1:20).

B. A Message that Flows Every Day

When we see a river continually flowing, we can see that there is life, there is something fresh, clean, refreshing. This is the work of God: it's a constant statement. There is no second in which the glory of God isn't seen; the various elements of nature account for it. His creation was done perfectly, precisely to flow every second without running out, sustained by His power and greatness. It's this fluency and continuity that speaks. The sky above us doesn't talk but it declares and is evidence of the Creator. We can listen to this and mediate on it. Nature doesn't speak to bring glory to itself but to praise and show God's glory. Even so, words cannot express this greatness.

King David only needed to look at God's creation to compose this Psalm. We can imagine that he heard the message. Each dawn with its sunbeams declared the creator God. Each evening with its infinite mixtures of colors was music to his ears. It is full of praise, a symphony of the beauty of God's Creation. Praise our God!

C. A Message that Reflects the Attributes of God

God's creation reveals its Creator, giving glory to God. As Psalm 19:1 says, they express who created them and His attributes. Some of these that we can highlight are the following:

1. Our God is creative.

Just look at a tiny part of His creation. In flowers, for example, there are many colors, multiple combinations, shapes and sizes. Have you ever wondered how a sunset can be different every day? Without a doubt, there is nothing monotonous in the work of God. He's the greatest painter, sculptor, architect and teacher par excellence in each and every one of the disciplines.

2. Another attribute is perfection.

Our perfect God created everything perfect, without mistakes. The Earth rotates smoothly. There is nothing unforeseen, poorly organized or random. Everything was made perfect: the skies, the lights, the vegetation, the animals. Everything we can see, done by his hand, has his perfection as the supreme seal.

3. God's creation is expressed in joy (vv. 5-6);

God delights in His creation. So, in Genesis 1, we can see that everything that God created was good, useful, helpful and beautiful. There was joy in His heart for His creation; and this reflects His majesty, His power and His greatness. Undoubtedly, He reveals who He is through what He has created.

Questions:

- Share three aspects that have been revealed to you through God's creation.

II. God's perfect law declares His greatness (Psalm 19:7-9)

A. The law of Lord is perfect (v. 7)

This expression refers to all of God's teaching which is perfect, complete, sufficient, and covers all aspects. In it, there is no redundancy, there is nothing missing, and it's powerful. It not only provides us with intellectual knowledge, but it brings us conversion, transforms, restores, and frees us, because it's true. There is no deceit or disguise in it, for it's completely true, and that makes it reliable, since "The statutes of the Lord are trustworthy" (v. 7b). So, we can be sure that it won't change.

Today, everything changes easily. People change their minds, their beliefs change; what was good for them yesterday is invalid today. Instead, what God does is reliable and we can build our lives on this stable, immovable foundation, and because it's stable, it's safe.

The law of God also makes the simple wise; that is, an ordinary person can obtain in the Word and testimony of God the tools to face life's obstacles wisely. Remember David's life ... Before he was king, he was a simple young man, a shepherd. He wasn't considered to be a valuable part of his family, and even his own father despised him by not sending for him at the moment when the prophet Samuel invited Jesse's family to sanctify themselves and make sacrifices (1 Samuel 16:5-12). However, this young simple man became king of God's people. He led many battles with wisdom, although the circumstances weren't in his favor (1 Samuel 18:6-7). God provided David with understanding and strategy to fight the battles wisely.

B. The straight path that brings joy to the heart (v.8)

The Word of God traces the path that we must follow. Nowadays, people live lost and confused; they don't know where to go, and all this brings them discontent, insecurity, distrust and sadness. But in God, we can find the right path, illuminated by His Word. That brings joy to the heart, security and hope. Verse 9 says: "The precepts of the Lord are right, giving joy to the heart. The commands of the Lord are radiant, giving light to the eyes." Living according to God's rules brings us joy. Divine precepts clearly show us what we should do. They provide light and understanding. True and deep joy doesn't come from all the nice things that happen to us, or from having possessions or people who love us, but that true joy is found in the knowledge of God and His Word.

C. The fear of the Lord is pure, enduring forever (v. 9)

The Bible says: "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge..." (Proverb 1:7). The greatness of God must be recognized, revered. His Word is clean, transparent. There is nothing hidden in it, nothing that can divert us from His restoration plan. Because it's perfect, it remains forever; It doesn't need changes or improvements. It's perfect for those who lived 500 years ago, as well as for those who will live in the future: "Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away" (Matthew 24:35).

Because it's the Word of God (who is the author and creator of everything that exists), only He has the wisdom and judgment necessary to provide us with direction. Likewise, "The decrees of the Lord are firm, and all of them are righteous" (Psalm 19:9b). These refer to God's judgment, to His thinking; that is, what He thinks concerning His creation, our lives, and the times we live in. His criteria are the only true and correct ones. That is why we must decide to believe His Word, and follow His advice. Without His Word, we would not know or understand anything. We would live in complete darkness, without direction or hope. This is why whoever comes to discover this truth longs for the presence of God and His Word.

D. They are more precious than gold (v.10)

There is nothing more valuable than God's law. There is no higher criteria for judgement. In the bottom line, there is nothing else that can make ultimate sense of our lives. Only God's precepts can answer our deepest needs. They admonish us, awaken our conscience, and clearly show us the reason for our existence. King David had many riches. But more than seeking them, the Bible tells us that he stood out for having a heart according to the heart of God (1 Samuel 13:14; Acts 13:22). King David's real wealth was living in God's presence, keeping His precepts and His law (Psalm 16:11). The Word of God was a delight for this king. The divine truth is like honey to our soul; it will sweeten it, nourish it, cover it. The Word is our best medicine.

Questions:

- How did King David describe the Word of God?
- How would you describe the Word of God?

III. Surrendering to God's greatness (Psalm 19:11-14)

God's revelation demands an answer. The truth is that it's very easy to remain unmoved by the revelation of God in His creation; and indifferent to the value of His word. David, however, in verse 11 says: "By them your servant is warned; in keeping them there is great reward."

King David, servant of God, was touched by these truths. He felt moved, and at the same time, guided, and corrected. God's message gives us direction and peace but only if we listen to His Word and obey it (Luke 11:28). King David, always sincere before the majesty of God, asked and implored the following:

A. "Forgive my hidden faults" (12b).

David wanted God to continue to use His Word to enable him to do what was right, to be free from acting against the dictates of his conscience. He asked God to forgive those hidden sins because he wanted to be blameless before God. Sometimes we think we're doing the right thing, but it's not so. We need God to enlighten us with His truth, with His judgments, so that we can do the right thing. Remember that He's the only one who has a perfect and true criterion (v.9).

B. "Keep your servant also from willful sins" (13a).

Jeremiah 17:9 says that our hearts are deceitful and perverse. That is why David didn't want to rely on his own way of thinking; He asked God to keep him from doing always what he wanted to, longing that only God's precepts should direct his life. He knew that only in this way could he be a whole and pure person. David was humble and realized that pride can cause our pride to rule over us (13b). He wanted to be "blameless and innocent of great transgression."

C. "May these words of my mouth and this meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight" (14a).

It's wonderful to see how after praising God for His indescribable creation that declares God's glory and reveals how God continually blesses us, and recognizing how faithful and just God is in His thinking, David once again recognized God as the sustenance of his life and his Savior when he said that God was his 'rock and redeemer' (v.14b). The deepest desires of his heart were to please God with all of his being.

Questions:

- What were David's requests to God?
- Mention practical examples of how to value God's creation.

Conclusion

This psalm amazes and admonishes us, for there is undoubtedly sublime beauty in everything God did thousands of years ago, and in what he continues to do every day in our lives. Undoubtedly, He expects an answer from us, just as King David surrendered to his Creator. We need to respond with love, humility and sincerity. Let's ask ourselves how are we responding to the message of our creative God. Praise His holy name!



Nature and Benefits of Confession

Marco A. Velasco (Costa Rica)

Passage to Study: Psalm 32

Memory Verse: "Then I acknowledged my sin to you and didn't cover up my iniquity. I said, 'I will confess my transgressions to the Lord.' And you forgave the guilt of my sin." Psalm 32:5

Lesson Aim: To understand and experience the character of God, who is full of grace and mercy, and who invites His people to confess their sins and experience the joy that comes with renewed forgiveness.

Introduction

Are you forgiven today? This is the question that every Christian has to ask himself in this lesson. We may think we were forgiven some time ago, when we confessed our sins and were saved. Our inclination is to think about past experiences of faith. I'm not saying that's wrong, but that experience must be reviewed and renewed in the present in the light of the Word of God and our day to day experiences. Forgiveness cannot remain just as something nice that we remember from our past when we were saved. Psalm 32 invites us to live or experience forgiveness as a way of life and an important aspect of our Christian spiritual formation.

Because of its literary form, Psalm 32 has been classified by different scholars as a penitential psalm where the writer reported his experience of confession of sin and the receipt of forgiveness (vv. 3-5). In the title we see that it is a Psalm of David and may have been written after David's sins committed in connection with his adultery with Bathsheba. It also becomes a testimony of instruction on the nature and benefits of the confession, as well as the character of God, who is full of grace and mercy.

Psalm 32 could have been used in ceremonies of confession or purification of the temple, but its origin and use have been associated more with the post-exilic synagogue (see Ezra 9; Nehemiah 9 and Daniel 9). Whatever its origin may have been, today this psalm speaks to readers of any generation, inviting the people of God to confess their sin, trust in God and live in joy (vs. 6-11).

I. The Joy of Forgiveness (Psalm 32:1-2)

Psalm 32:1 starts off with a positive note: "Blessed is the one whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered." This formula of receiving blessings or happiness reminds of other verses in the Psalms (1:1, 2:12 etc.). But, the characteristic of Psalm 32 is that it defines happiness

in terms of forgiveness. So, this psalm works as an antidote to contemporary times because being righteous isn't a matter of being without sin; rather, it's a matter of knowing that we have been forgiven, being open to God's instruction (Psalm 1:2, 32:8-9), as well as trusting in the Lord instead of trusting oneself (Psalm 2:12, 32:10). The cost of happiness is the honest and humble confession that helps us to receive God's renewed forgiveness.

You want to be happy? The pursuit of happiness has become one of the *raison d'être* for many people. However, experience tells us that few find it. Why? Psalm 32 informs us of the reason why many people don't find happiness. Part of it is because they look for it within themselves.

Where do we find true happiness? The psalmist instructs us and testifies that the forgiven person is happy, has found true happiness. Social scientists admit that we live in an era where the most common diseases are related to our moods, depression and a meaningless life. The message of Psalm 32 is what the vast majority of people need, so we need to understand it and share it wherever we are.

If we analyze the form of happiness that we find in the world, we can observe that in reality it's a 'liquid' happiness. This is because this happiness is based on a precarious life and under great uncertainty and anxiety. As Zygmunt Bauman says: "Liquid life is a precarious life and lived in conditions of constant uncertainty" (Bauman, 2005, p. 2)

The instruction given to us by the psalmist is that happiness must be sought outside of us and not within us. Happiness based on renewed forgiveness must be sought in God. He will help us think about ourselves in the right way, and in principle, this is done by recognizing our own mistakes and seeing ourselves as forgiven and transformed sinners (Psalm 32:11).

The secret of a happy life also includes being willing to recognize that we're responsible for the things we do, for good or for bad. The evils we commit almost always evoke feelings of guilt or depression, whether we want them to or no. Recognizing our responsibility for what we do, expressed in genuine confession and trust in God's mercy, brings renewed forgiveness and the happiness we need in this life: "Rejoice in the Lord and be glad, you righteous; sing, all you who are upright in heart! (v.11).

Questions:

- How did the Psalmist define happiness?
- Why do you think he thought like this?
- Make a list of things in which people are looking for their happiness today. Then ask yourself: where am I looking for my happiness?

II. Sin, Its Effects and God's Forgiveness (Psalm 32:3-5)

The honest and humble confession was the psalmist's response to the sin he had committed. It's also the path of forgiveness and renewal. Psalm 32 reminds us that forgiveness isn't an excuse for continuing to do evil, but an extension of God's grace for us to seek forgiveness and feel sincerely regretful.

From a literary analysis, Psalm 32:5 makes use of three terms for the word 'sin.' "Then I acknowledged my sin to you and didn't cover up my iniquity. I said, 'I will confess my transgressions to the Lord.' And you forgave the guilt of my sin." Each of these words have a slightly different meaning. a) "Sin" (Hebrew: pasha), is the most general, and means 'to miss the mark.' b) "Transgression" connotes voluntary rebellion, and c) "Iniquity" / "fault" (Hebrew: hatá) indicates durable and destructive effects of disobedience.

Each term of the forementioned informs us of a dimension of sin. All three dimensions work simultaneously when sin takes control of our lives. When we fail to do God's will, we deviate voluntarily, and sooner or later, we experience the consequences in our relationships, in ourselves, in our mind, in our heart and in our physical health.

Psalm 32 teaches us that the first step we should take when we sin is essential. We need to acknowledge our need. The Psalmist was suffering: "When I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night your hand was heavy on me; my strength was sapped as in the heat of summer" (vs. 3-4). As we can see, the consequences of this were devastating in his life, including his physical and emotional effects, besides the spiritual ones, of course. But the first

obstacle to any confession of sin is our silence, because this implies the rejection of grace! But God is totally ready to forgive.

Sin can affect our mind and emotions. We're a whole, an interconnected system of thoughts, emotions and body. We don't think in terms of sin in order to explain our physical illnesses. However, to the extent that we fail to recognize our sinfulness, we also fail to alleviate many of our physical and emotional ills. How many hidden sins and family stories are there in your life? There are always devastating physical, moral and spiritual effects due to our failure to recognize our sinfulness. So, it wasn't until King David (v. 3) broke his silence and confessed his transgressions (v. 5b), that God forgave the evil of his sin.

The psalmist tells us that divine forgiveness is always available and is all inclusive. This can be seen in the literary structure of this psalm that reflects this inclusiveness. At the beginning the Psalmist states, "Blessed is the one whose transgressions are forgiven..." and in 5c "you forgave the guilt of my sin" (v.5c).

Now, to the surprise of us as readers, after the announcement of forgiveness (v.5), none of the words used to refer to sin reappear. The point is this: the situation changes for anyone who recognizes their sin, places their trust in God's grace, and not on their own religious merits or their moral condition!

We won't be totally free until we have confessed and broken the silence. It's true that we haven't learned to open spaces for safe and restorative confession, but we can go to the Lord. He knows all things. We aren't in the hands of a God of wrath, but in the hands of a God who surrounds us with his mercy: "but the Lord's unfailing love surrounds the one who trusts in him" (v.10b).

Psalm 32 is a testimony, on the one hand, of the consequences of sin in our relationship with God, in our relationship with our neighbor, and in ourselves. On the other hand, this psalm is an instruction to begin to fight sin and rectify it through honest confession and acceptance of God's grace.

Questions:

- What 3 words are used here to describe sin?
- What were the physical effects of king David's sin?
- How did David get forgiveness?

III. God is Faithful to Forgive (Psalm 32:6)

King David knew that God had forgiven him. He found the reality of forgiveness of his sin, not in his own achievements, but only and exclusively in the faithfulness of God who forgives them. For the psalmist, the “confession prayer” became a way of life; he recognized that his own achievements, abilities and intentions were always insufficient.

Today, it's very easy to focus on ourselves, on our achievements and Christian religiosity, but Psalm 32 tries to tell us again and again that God always forgives those who confess and repent of their sin. He's the one who takes the first step to find us. The psalmist addressed his prayer to the Lord and put all his trust in Him saying, “Therefore let all the faithful pray to you while you may be found” (v. 6).

Questions:

- What is God's grace?
- Should we confess our sins each day?
- What results would there be in our relationship with God and with our fellow men if we practiced this as a spiritual discipline?

IV. Songs of Deliverance for the Forgiveness Received (Psalm 32:7-11)

Verse 7 makes God the subject and the psalmist, the object of God's merciful action. “You are my hiding place; you will protect me from trouble and surround me with songs of deliverance.” Forgiveness not only

included the annulment of the psalmist's sins but also forgiveness granted a new relationship with God and a righteousness heart. God faithfully protects us (see also Psalm 27:5, 31:20, 61:4, 91:1).

God promises to instruct and teach and with His loving eye to guide us (v.8). If we keep looking towards the Lord, we will know what is right and wrong and which way to go. He warns the psalmist not to be like a stubborn ignorant mule that has to be led by ‘bit and bridle.’

Verse 10 states: “...Lord's unfailing love surrounds the one who trusts in him.” The expression “unfailing love” indicates a new condition of the psalmist in his relationship with God: it's the eternal love of God that surrounds and sustains him. In the New Testament, John would make explicit what is implied here: that “God is love” (1 John 4:8).

Questions:

- What does this Psalm teach us that God promised to do for us?
- How do you experience God's ‘unfailing love’ in your life?

Conclusion

King David had made a mess of things and was suffering because he knew that he had done wrong. In this psalm, we can see how coming to God, and repenting of his terrible sins, meant that his relationship with God was restored. God promised to guide him, and the Psalm ends on a jubilant note of gratitude and praise.



What To Do When Troubles Come

Loysbel Pérez Salazar (Cuba)

Passage to Study: Psalm 34

Memory Verse: “The righteous person may have many troubles, but the Lord delivers him from them all.” Psalm 34:19

Lesson Aim: To understand what is happening and practice trust in God in the midst of difficulties.

Introduction

Problems are part of life in this world, nevertheless, to the believer, everything that happens works for good (Romans 8:28), even when humanly we think that it's something negative. There are those who say that becoming a Christian means the end of trials, difficulties and afflictions. But this isn't true, and often they are part of our growth in God and fulfillment of his purpose.

Richard S. Taylor defines trials and troubles as periods or methods which determine someone's suitability or ineptitude for certain projected privileges. It includes examination, and also training and preparation (Beacon Theological Dictionary. USA: CNP, 1995, p.559).

Nobody wants to go through trials and troubles. We want to stop them from coming, but they cannot be avoided. They will arrive, and the attitude we take will make us winners or not.

Psalm 34 contains David's reaction to one of the many trials he lived. This psalm is one of eight that relate to Saul's persecutions of David. It contains the poetic account, born of David's heart, which reveals his internal experience with God, of what was happening to him as narrated in 1 Samuel 21:10-15.

David was running away from King Saul, and when he arrived at Gath, the land of King Achish, they began to threaten him because the officers recognized him as David of Judah (1 Samuel 21:11). Because of this, he was afraid of the outcome and took the initiative to pretend to be crazy. The words we find in Psalm 34 were born in this context of this complicated trial. In this Psalm, David shows us the attitude God's children should take when we must face trials.

I. Exalt God at All Times (Psalm 34:1-3)

It's difficult for some believers to exalt God when things in life aren't going the best way.

A. Exaltation: the attitude of the believer (v.1)

Trials and troubles provoke two contrary attitudes in the lives of believers:

1. Some turn away from faith and their trust in God will be weakened.

There are believers that when the test shakes their lives, they run away from the church and even blame God. Also, some believers who were growing in their faith and are active ministerial life, when they go through trials, lose that rhythm, and their dedication to God isn't the same.

2. Others grow and strengthen their faith.

For many believers, going through difficult trials makes them grow, strengthening their trust in God even more. They see God as never before; they have glorious experiences with Him, and receive new incentive, motivated by God's intervention in their lives. In David's case, the test led to the affirmation of his faith and his exaltation to God.

The initial part of the study psalm is very impressive: "I will extol the Lord at all times; his praise will always be on my lips (v.1). This was a strong, firm resolution. No matter what happened in his life, David was always going to bless and praise God.

This is what each believer is invited to do in the midst of adverse situations. What happens outside cannot move what is inside. In other words, the circumstances we go through cannot condition the faith and spiritual position we have in Christ. Everything else can lead us to new dimensions of spiritual growth and Christian maturity.

The evidence is that trials and troubles don't come to destroy, but to affirm and elevate believers to a deeper experience of the knowledge of God. It's those periods that allow us to demonstrate that we're different, that we aren't afraid, that we don't put God to one side, but our lives will exalt the Lord, however difficult it may be. The Lord remains God. He doesn't abandon His children (Joshua 1:5; Isaiah 43:2).

In times of trouble we have a decision to make: will we worship God in the midst of trials, or allow the various situations of life, such as worries and cares, to occupy the time and place of that worship.

B. Invitation to exaltation (vv. 2-3)

Verse 2 says: "Glorify the Lord with me; let's exalt his name together." When believers go through trials and their souls rejoice in the Lord, the people around will be impacted and they may very well rejoice with them. David, in his psalms, invites us to worship and give God glory even in times of trouble. This psalmist encourages us to glorify God in the worst circumstance impacting those around us.

However, we find some believers complaining about everything they have to go through, and even more, when things are tight. On the other hand, it's moving to observe sick believers, sometimes with terminal illnesses, others whose children have left home, folk with violent spouses, some with problems of living together as a family and even some are in jail. In spite of the extremely difficult circumstances they're suffering, they're always praising and exalting God. Rather than making them feel depressed, the difficulty they're going through makes them turn to the Lord and find joy in Him.

Questions:

- Difficulties and troubles provoke two contrary attitudes in the lives of believers. What are they?
- What should you do to avoid falling into the wrong attitude?

II. Seeking God at All Times (Psalm 34:4-10)

When we're going through trials, the first step is to seek God's presence and not look for human alternatives. We'll find protection and the answer only in God. The expression 'seeking God' speaks about our prayers, groaning before His holy presence, and believing in Him. God isn't far away. He's very close to us, but He waits for us to ask Him before He intervenes.

A. Seeking God in the midst of the time of trouble

David was being emphatic in this section of Psalm 34. He was showing the actions he took in the midst of the test, which were the following: He 'sought the Lord' (v.4), he 'looked to Him' (v.5), he called out to God (v.6), he took refuge in him God (v.8) and he feared God (v.9).

Each of these actions is valid for believers in all times. Nothing happens without prayer. Communication with God is the secret to success of our lives. It's what allows us to understand how we're living and where we're going. Also, it helps us know why we're going through this troubling time.

Affirm God, trust Him, believe Him, cry out to Him ... All this can only be known by those who experience it. They know the value of those actions when the test reaches its maximum heat. Stories like those of Daniel in the lion's den (Daniel 6), the three young Hebrews in the furnace of fire (Daniel 3), and others, affirm what

David expressed in this psalm. Many stories of the lives of current believers also confirm the experiential truths of this psalm.

If the trials and troubles are knocking at our door today, let's begin to experience what it means to meet God in intimate prayer. If we really love Him, the trials will bring us closer to Him. If we have neglected our spiritual life a little, we need to come back with an intense huge thirst for God in our innermost beings.

B. Blessings for seeking God

David lists a series of blessings that all those who seek the face of God receive in the midst of trials. Let's see next what these are: God answers (v.4); He delivers them from all fears (v.4); he enlightens them (v.5); doesn't allow them to be ashamed (v.5); He saves them from all their troubles (v.6); they see that God is good (v.8); nothing is lacking for those who fear him (v.9); and "those who seek the Lord lack no good thing" (v.10).

Today, all these blessings remain valid for the lives of believers who, like David, seek the face of God. Even though it's a text that came out of the lived experience of a Hebrew man, thousands of believers in the world, throughout all times can testify that these blessings have been palpable in their lives. The same God of David continues to offer them to the anyone who seeks him. David understood, not just from the letter and the scrolls, but from his own life experience, that God is good and that those who trust in Him can be called happy (Psalm 34:8).

Those who have gone through trials and have seen God working, know that it's He who helped them leave the hospital well again, frees their children from mistakes and addictions, builds up better relationships in marriages, helps people to leave jail and start again in life, helps those who fight against injustices, can encourage someone to make their business successful again, provide needed work and change tears into joy. But mature believers also must understand that even if this doesn't happen, He's still God, and our attitude toward Him shouldn't change.

Questions:

- Share some of the blessings that those who seek the face of God receive in the midst of trials (Psalm 34:4-6,8-9).
- Do you think you're already enjoying them? Comment.

III. Living a holiness lifestyle at all times (Psalm 34:11-17)

Righteous in the context of this psalm doesn't refer to equity but to holiness, that is, to righteous living before God. The Lord doesn't want us to lose our holy lifestyle during trials. He blesses the righteous, not sinners. His favor is over believers who keep His Word.

Verse 17 says: "The righteous cry out, and the Lord hears them; he delivers them from all their troubles." We shouldn't misunderstand this verse, believing that the only way to get an answer from God is to be good. His response is tied to His will, but it's a promise about how God treats the life of the believer.

A. Parameters for the righteous

David listed a series of parameters that must be present in people who fear God and want to have a long life. These parameters haven't lost their validity, for the New Testament attests to them in many texts. Jesus and the apostles underlined these paradigms for holiness. Let's see what they are:

- "Keep your tongue from evil ..." (v. 13; see also James 1:26, 3:5-6).
- "Keep ... your lips from telling lies" (v. 13; see also Ephesians 4:25; 1 Peter 3:10).
- "Turn from evil ..." (v. 14; see also 1 Peter 3:9).
- "... do good ..." (v. 14; see also Romans 12:21).
- "... seek peace, and pursue it" (v. 14; see also 1 Peter 3:11).

These parameters must be an essential part of every believer's life. Keeping them will help us avoid trouble and trials, and in the middle of the difficulties, they will help us get out.

B. Right living is the way forward

Sometimes we discover that people have difficulties because their lives are somewhat disorderly. God establishes a model of right living in his Word that will help us avoid many difficulties. To give just one example: if we don't raise our voices in anger, we'll have better interpersonal relationships and our home will enjoy harmony (Psalm 34:13-14; Colossians 3:8).

God desires that His righteousness should always be a reality in the lives of His children. That's to say that what He's taught us is lived out daily in the school, workplace, in business, and at home, etc.

There are those who lose their holiness when troubles arrive, and the pressure of the moment causes them to break God's laws. They tell lies, places are visited that shouldn't be, words are spoken that shouldn't be said, and other sins are committed that break the believer's life of integrity. Given all this, we must always remember that God rewards right living.

Questions:

- What are the parameters of the righteous before God according to Psalm 34:13 and 14?
- What is the best way to deal with troubles?

IV. God answers the prayer of his children (Psalm 34:18-22)

Something of which all who love God are convinced is that He answers the prayer of his children (Jeremiah 33.3).

A. God works for the righteous

Your holiness lifestyle has weight in heaven. God is close to the suffering of the righteous. He knows about the troubles they are passing through, and doesn't remain still. Our Lord is God of action, for He acts in favor of the righteous (Psalm 34:19).

Scripture doesn't tell us that the righteous are free from trials and afflictions, and affirms that the righteous also suffer. Against this, what God promises is His deliverance and his presence in each one of those experiences (v.19).

At present, there are various common ideas of victory in the lives of believers. However, in many of those cases, they are misrepresented. Some say that affliction in believers is due to their sin or lack of faith. This study psalm and other biblical texts tell us that the righteous also suffer and go through trials.

Trust in God in the midst of trials is indispensable. Believers must believe that God will deliver them, although it may not be the way they expect, but God's deliverance will always be better than ours.

B. Promises of God in favor of the righteous

The psalmist presented some of the promises of God's favor he experienced in his life; and that we can claim now for ourselves: He will keep our life completely (v.20), those who hate us will be condemned (v.21), our soul is redeemed (v.22) and we won't be condemned (v.22).

God's promises in Scripture are always valid. They aren't something just for the future; we need to claim them and make them ours on a day-to-day basis. If we're passing through some trouble or affliction in the present time, these promise of God's help that David shared with us are still valid. We need to start seeing that our heavenly Father is with us in this intense period of trials. We shouldn't look around us but look up, as it's from the Lord that our answers, comfort and blessings will come.

Questions:

- What does God promise in these verses?
- Do you have testimony of how God helped you in times of trouble? Share some of them.

Conclusion

Troubles and difficulties are normal parts of the life of the righteous. They will prove our suitability or ineptitude. What God expects is that we exalt him, seek him, continue living according to His standards, and as always, He never fails; Our prayer will be answered.



A Joyful Proclamation of God's Faithfulness

César Barco (Ecuador)

Passage to Study: Psalm 40

Memory Verse: "Blessed is the one who trusts in the Lord, who doesn't look to the proud, to those who turn aside to false gods." Psalm 40:4

Lesson Aim: To understand the benefits and favors that God gives to those who trust in Him.

Introduction

The Psalms are songs, hymns and stories that were set music. As time went by, the Psalms became prayers, and then sermons. So, they went from being sung, to being preached, and then taught as doctrine. Much of Christian theology is derived from them, according to each church's theological tradition. For example, we as Nazarenes believe that Psalm 51:5 supports the doctrine of original sin.

Originally, the psalms were sung to express the feelings, emotions and truths that their authors felt at that time. Psalm 40 belongs to the first section - Book I (Psalm 1:1-41:13). There are five groups of Psalms and it's believed that they were used in the liturgy of the Synagogue alongside the Pentateuch – the first five books of the Old testament. The first collection of Psalms, mainly written by David, tells us how humanity was created, fell into sin and then was promised redemption. Psalm 40 is a personal song of thanksgiving.

I. Benefits of Waiting on God (Psalm 40:1-3)

Patience is one of the least practiced virtues today. Knowing how to wait with patience isn't common. Society has sold us the idea that everything has to be on the fast track – immediate satisfaction, fast food, fast internet, effective and fast teaching-learning methods, etc. Everything seems to move along at an extraordinary pace, and few have the patience to wait for things. The psalmist starts by saying: "I waited patiently for the Lord; he turned to me and heard my cry" (v.1). Many times, we feel that God doesn't answer our prayers, but we aren't patient enough to wait for His answer. Maybe too, we haven't learned to submit to Him patiently or to wait for His deliverance, drowning ourselves in daily afflictions.

In relation to verse 2, we may ask ourselves: how is God going to get us "out of the slimy pit, out of the mud and mire?" How is He going to lift us and set our feet on a rock firmly?

But if we aren't practicing patience, we won't see the ways that God wants to manifest Himself in our lives. On the contrary, often we have been affected by our impatience and hopelessness. When someone does wrong to us, we can't wait to seek justice, often creating an environment of resentment and guilt towards the other person.

For example, let's imagine a young man who is waiting for his girlfriend to arrive on time, but when she arrives late, he yells angrily: "Why did you take so long? Did you forget our arrangement? Or were you with someone else? What a lack of respect!" This type of situation can even end up violently. He wasn't patient. If he had waited patiently, he would have shown his trust in her. Patience is one of the fruit of the Holy Spirit, and it's governed by love (Galatians 5:22).

So, David reminded us that to see the benefits of God, we must have a good attitude toward Him, something analogous to entire sanctification, which is preceded by the entire consecration. Thus, the Lord sanctifies us through His Spirit, as long as the Christian seeks to consecrate himself to Him.

When this happens, the psalmist David declared in verse 3: "He put a new song in my mouth, a hymn of praise to our God." When we have given our hearts completely to God, new songs of praise well up in our being, thanking Him for who He is, what he has done, and what he'll continue to do.

Some people who go to church are indifferent to the presence of God. They don't make the least effort to hum the songs, much less join in enthusiastically with the worship. Others don't even smile or express joy because Christ has redeemed them. Sometimes this occurs not only in the laity, but also in the leaders, who seem to have 'stony faces.' Although what is reflected externally doesn't have to do one hundred percent with the attitude to the presence of God during moments of corporate worship, we express together our worship and praise to God with joy. The Bible mentions that praising and worshiping God in our congregations makes God glad, and He encourages us all to participate with joy (Psalm 22:3, 122:1, 133:1; Zephaniah 3:17).

The psalmist worshiped God with psalms, even though he had a grieving heart, as will be seen later. But today, many people who go to church don't participate actively in the worship, they remain serious, distracted; they don't lift their voices up in praise; they don't raise their hands; and criticize everything, etc. They aren't offering worship to God with a new song.

Ask the students to discuss this point. Are you participating actively in church service? What is your attitude when you go to church? What hinders the congregation to really worship God in the beauty of holiness? Do the words express how we feel? Does the music hinder or help in the times of communal worship? True vibrant congregational worship can lead non-Christians to the Lord as verse 3 states: "He put a new song in my mouth, a hymn of praise to our God. Many will see and fear the Lord and put their trust in him."

Questions:

- How do you define patience?
- Is it a common virtue in today's world?
- How could the virtue of patience be promoted today, in the midst of the congregation and society?

II. God's Blessings for the Believer (Psalm 40:5-6)

The psalmist proclaims: "Many, Lord my God, are the wonders you have done, the things you planned for us" (v.5). He recognizes all the things that God has done on his behalf. However in our contexts, many times when we're called to testify to the congregation, whether in a service, a congregational fast, a vigil, Sunday school class, or house groups etc., we don't know what to say. This happens because of the following:

1. People think that they can only testify of God's blessings if they were healed of a terminal illness, if they could pay a large debt, if they got a new better paying job, or similar things. They think that thanking God is only relevant when He does big things for us. For others, they are so bogged down with their day-to-day lives – getting up, eating, keeping their jobs, being with their families etc. that they don't perceive that God's hand is also in all these mundane things. But we must testify to all of God's good gifts, even if they don't hit the headlines.
2. Others don't testify because they find it difficult. Maybe they are shy, panic when they're up front, are short of words, or don't speak eloquently. This shouldn't stop us from testifying. People like that should reflect and ask God for help to witness to the divine work in their lives.
3. Others forget that every day God is doing them many favors.
4. Finally, others don't even realize that God fills them with so many blessings, and therefore, they cannot identify them. For example: when God blesses a loved one, he's not only blessing that person individually, but he's also doing it to the whole family, because we all rejoice that this beloved family triumphs through God's favor.

There may be other reasons why Christians don't see the good things God does for them. Perhaps the word that expresses this attitude is ingratitude. There are many blessings that we receive from God's hand and even in moments of trial and tribulation, the Lord promises us that things will work out for our good. Paul says in Romans 8:28: "We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose." Everything that passes in our lives can be used to increase our holiness.

Many people believe that if they just tithe that will be enough. The Message version of this Psalm translates verse 6 in the following way: "Doing something for you, bringing something to you— that's not what you're after." We can't bribe God. Tithing isn't enough. What He wants is obedience and lives consecrated to Him in all aspects.

Questions:

- Why do you think that Christians find it hard to testify about what God is doing in their lives?
- How does God use adversity and difficulties in our lives?

III. Requesting divine help and protection (Psalm 40:12-15,17)

In these verses, the psalmist made a request for help and protection from God. He recognized that the evils that had surrounded him were also many, and some came because of his sins. The psalmist contrasted his many sins with the many favors of God (vs. 5, 12). God has mercy on the person despite his many transgressions. Let's remember what Paul said: "... when sin abounded, grace overflowed" (Romans 5:20).

It's interesting to read how a modern version expresses verse 12: "When troubles ganged up on me, a mob of sins past counting, I was so swamped by guilt I couldn't see my way clear. More guilt in my heart than hair on my head, so heavy was the guilt that my heart gave out" (The Message). The psalmist confessed to God that sin dominated him, had him cornered, blinded, and had taken away his moral strength. He compared the amount of his sins with the number of hairs he had. Once he confessed his sin, his sad and precarious reality, he asked for help: "Be pleased to save me, Lord; come quickly, Lord, to help me" (Psalm 40:13).

This is integrity, as opposed to hypocrisy. We too need to recognize and not hide our sinful situation. Then, we can ask God for help to overcome our sins every day. Hypocrites may recognize their situation, but they hide from their true situation. Most likely, they don't ask God for help either but continue to live hiding their sin. Real Christians admit their situation. They know their weak points and cry out to God until they experience divine help to overcome sin. On the contrary, hypocrites don't own up to their real true selves, although they know their weak points and are in the church congregation, they don't seek for God's help to live holy lives. Only God can sort out people's Achilles tendons, giving us strength to overcome besetting sins.

That is why the psalmist asked God to deal with the people who had made him suffer, those who criticized him and were trying to destroy him. It's God's job to punish others. Vengeance belongs only to the Lord.

Verse 17 is a wonderful affirmation of the psalmist's relationship with God: "But as for me, I am poor and needy; may the Lord think of me. You are my help and my deliverer; you are my God, don't delay." David recognized that he was afflicted, he was depressed, fatigued, needy, suffering, and poor.

God is still there ready and waiting to help us. Even in the most horrifying affliction, we too need to turn to him and praise him in spite of our circumstances. Can we wait patiently in moments like these? Patience isn't passivity. When we have patience, God does His work in us. Let's remember: "...he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus" (Philippians 1:6). We need to share with others the stories of how God has blessed us, however small they may seem.

Questions:

- What is the difference between authenticity and hypocrisy?
- How can we become more authentic Christians?
- How should we pray for God's help and protection?

Conclusion

Let's consecrate ourselves completely to God. If we're going through a moment of affliction and need, let's not forget to praise the name of the Lord, for he'll turn that circumstance into something productive, as well as strengthen our commitment so that we can see what He's doing in our lives and in His church.



The Confession of a Great King

José Barrientos (Guatemala)

Passage to Study: Psalm 51

Memory Verse: “Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me.”
Psalm 51:10.

Lesson Aim: To understand that true confession and repentance renew our relationship with God.

Introduction

My father, now in the presence of the Lord, pioneered the preaching of the gospel in one of the most jungle regions of our country, Guatemala. He had many practical experiences during that time. One of them was the monkey hunting by the inhabitants of the place. To do this, they tied a clay jug with a narrow entrance to a tree. Inside the bowl, they put peanuts. Then, the monkeys smelled the peanuts and squeezed their hands into the jar. They grabbed the peanut, shut their fingers around it, but they couldn't take their hand out of the jar. The answer was simple; all the monkey had to do was let go of the peanut and extend its hand. However, these monkeys always clung onto the peanut and that is how they were caught.

At first glance, the clumsy action of these animals seems to be pretty silly; however, it's a good picture of what often happens when we commit a sin. We persist in continuing to do wrong when if we just let go we would be free.

The Bible advises about similar attitudes, exhorting us not to be stubborn like the horse or the mule (Psalm 32:9). In this Psalm, we find an event that illustrates what to do when we have sinned. This story has its antecedent in the terrible sin committed by King David (2 Samuel 11, 12). He tried to cover it up but God exposed him through the prophet Nathan. It's in this context that David wrote Psalm 51.

I. David confesses his sin and requests forgiveness (Psalm 51:1-5)

When the prophet Nathan pointed out his grave sin to King David (2 Samuel 12:7-9), the king adopted a correct attitude (2 Samuel 12:13a). These first five verses reveal that David was crying out to God to show mercy to him. David's conscience, which had been woken up by the Holy Spirit during the timely message

of the prophet, recognized that he had done some serious actions that God doesn't approve of. In fact, he had broken several of the ten commandments. He had sinned against God and others. David recognized the nature of God, who is slow to anger and great in mercy (Psalm 103:8).

The impact of sin on David was manifested in his body, in his mind and in his spirit; He was tangled up in sin and needed a way out. We must remember that before the arrival of the prophet Nathan, David was trying to act as if nothing had happened. But it's impossible to hide our sins from God. When he woke up to this fact, he was filled with remorse and deep sorrow for what he had done.

After appealing to God's mercy, David made three key requests:

- a). "... blot out my transgressions" (v. 1). David knew he was rebellious, he had broken God's laws in his actions. He asked God to erase his rebellions. However, this was only the most external manifestation of the problem. God's attitude to rebellious people can be seen in Isaiah 30:1-9. Mankind has a willful tendency to choose to break the laws of God.
- b). "Wash away all my iniquity..." (Psalm 51:2a). David's fallen nature had induced him to commit one sin after another including the murder of Bathsheba's husband. He realized that he needed a deep act of cleansing, not just on the outside, although what he had done couldn't be undone, but in his innermost being
- c). "... cleanse me from my sin" (Psalm 51:2b). David begged God to cleanse him from sin. Jesus taught that sin stems from the heart (Matthew 15:16-20). So, King David's request went deeper than forgiving his rebellious and evil actions, he wanted the Divine surgeon to operate on his thoughts.

At this point, it's important to remember David's position. He was the king, and as such, many things were allowed, especially if he wanted to be like the other kings of the earth. The prophet Nathan also recognized that. So, he spoke through a story and not directly. But David wasn't just any king; he was the king of Israel, the people of God. He knew the law of God and it was this law that was going to be his judge.

People who are in high positions have a hard time recognizing sins and depriving themselves of privileges, but David's attitude on hearing Nathan's story was positive. This king wasn't afraid to acknowledge his fault before God.

The behavior of some kings of Israel and Judah shows their unwillingness to acknowledge their sin. The following chart presents some examples of those who didn't listen to the voice of God:

King	Prophet	Verse
"Even after this, Jeroboam didn't change his evil ways ..."	a prophet	1 Kings 13:33
"...[you, Baasha] caused my people Israel to sin..."	Jehu	1 Kings 16:2
"This is what the king [Ahab]: says: Put this fellow in prison..."	Micaiah	1 Kings 22:27

The prophets of the Old Testament spoke out with courage against what the kings and spiritual leaders were doing. Many of them lost their lives because they confronted kings. David, on the other hand, was one of the few kings that heard the voice of God in the prophet Nathan's message. He knew that he needed to change; he needed new thoughts and a lifestyle of obedience rather than rebellion, without evil or rebellion.

Questions:

- According to 2 Samuel chapters 11 and 12, what had David done wrong?
- How many of the Ten Commandments did he break?
- What does this Psalm tell us about David's relationship with God?

II. David requests for spiritual renewal for his innermost being (Psalm 51:6-12)

David's personality had been affected by sin. As a famous king, he had experienced the care and power of God. He realized that without God, his innermost being was crumbling, falling apart. The same happens

today when Christians give in to sin. The apostle Paul exhorted us to take care of how we walk (1 Corinthians 10:12).

David revealed his faith in his prayer. He knew that God was listening to him and that He would also answer him. He also underlined the divine and spiritual nature of God, and knew that God loves faithfulness and truthfulness, even in our deepest thoughts. David had a deep spiritual dimension. He approached God in contrition of spirit, and his penitent expressions incorporated worship of God. In that context, he said that God: "desired faithfulness even in the womb" the most intimate place (Psalm 51:6). God acts with intimacy and wisdom helping him understand his situation.

God didn't leave David without the opportunity to recognize his sin, but He would punish him here, and in the life to come, if David didn't show remorse and regret. All the positive actions that David had previously done didn't justify his sin. His relationship with God had been broken, and Nathan had come to warn him. In the same way as David was affected by sin in all his personality (will, feelings and thoughts); later, it needed to be restored integrally.

The Hebrew law stipulated a ritual of purification that was performed with hyssop (Numbers 19); however, David goes beyond the ritual to the source itself and asked to be purified with hyssop (Psalm 51:7); anticipating in this way the spiritual purification by the blood of the Lord Jesus Christ that later would be poured out on the cross (Hebrews 10:1,10-14).

In these verses we can perceive that David felt his need to get right with God again, to renew the close relationship that he had enjoyed before. He asks God not to hide His face from his sins (v. 9). He wants to "hear joy and gladness" (v. 8). Realizing that he has done something which is terribly wrong, he pleads: "Do not cast me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me" (v. 11). David realizes that he needs to be changed completely, mind, body and spirit. "Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me" (v. 10). He desperately wants God to forgive him and renew the deep relationship that they had together before. "Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me" (v. 12).

Questions:

- How does sin affect our thinking, our wills and emotions?
- What are the things David asks for in this Psalm?
- What is the difference between confession and repentance?

III. David's desire to do right before God (Psalm 51:14-17)

The Mosaic law established forms of atonement for sins, depending on economic abilities of people, so that every person could present an offering for sin and its atonement (Leviticus 5:5-7). David could easily present the sin and atonement sacrifices that the law established; nevertheless, David knew that God didn't "delight in sacrifice" or "take pleasure in burnt offerings" (v. 16). He knew what God really wanted: "...sacrifice" of "a broken spirit" and "a broken and contrite heart" (v. 17).

David had learned a deep lesson and He promised to "teach transgressors" God's ways, "so that sinners" could turn back to God (v. 13). The church needs to carry out this role, like Nathan, warning people of their sins. David too wanted to warn his people of the terrible consequences of sin. The great Hebrew poet who wrote psalms and played music to king Saul asked God to: "Open" his "lips" so that his "mouth" could praise God (v. 15).

King David went on to buy the land for the temple which his son Solomon would later build (2 Samuel 24:24). There is a sad side to David's story. God forgave completely his sins but the consequences remained in his family situation. He was still the model king after God's own heart.

Questions:

- In what ways can we see that David was humble?
- Why was he called the "king after God's own heart"?
- May forgiven sins still lead to consequences? Why?

Conclusion

David's humble attitude, acknowledging his sin before God, shows us the depth of his relationship with God. He truly repented of his sin and his relationship with God was restored. God healed his innermost being mind, body and spirit. But sin has its consequences.



King David's Longing for God

Daniel Ncuna Esono (Equatorial Guinea, Africa)

Passage to Study: Psalm 63

Memory Verse: "You, God, are my God, earnestly I seek you; I thirst for you, my whole being longs for you, in a dry and parched land where there is no water." Psalm 63:1

Lesson Aim: To encourage us as believers to have a deeper and more meaningful relationship with God.

Introduction

David wrote this psalm at a very difficult time in his life. He had been dethroned, although temporarily, and was forced to go to the dry arid desert. Maybe it was like those who have been forced into exile. In Africa, my continent, people are forced to leave their villages, cities, families, belongings and much more. They try to go to Europe. They flee for political or economic reasons. Generally, those who do this are very sad people, who sometimes end up becoming resigned to difficulties.

David was east of the Jordan River (2 Samuel 15:23, 16:2, 17:16). Despite this harsh reality, David didn't concentrate his thoughts on the issues in his life, or his desires or on the circumstances surrounding him. He didn't allow them to cloud his spiritual vitality. In fact, the very reverse is true; this situation led king David to desire more than anything a close intimate relationship with God.

In spite of the fact that this is a short Psalm, it speaks clearly and insistently about the life of devotion to God. Although David wrote this psalm in a crisis situation, he shows us his desire to have communion with God (vs. 1-2), as well as how David valued and esteemed God (vs. 3-4). Likewise, one can help but notice David's satisfaction in God (v. 5), the result of his intimacy / communion with Him (v. 6).

Regardless of our situation at this time, we can learn three important things from David: first, the value of a close relationship with God (vs. 1-4); second, how to praise God in difficult circumstances (vs. 5-8); and third, how the Lord protects and gives us victory amid adverse situations (vs. 9-11).

I. David's close relationship with God (Psalm 63:1-4)

It's moving to hear David when he cried out: "You, God, are my God" (v. 1), in the middle of the desert. This expression is the result of the close and personal relationship David had with God. This same expression can sustain our spiritual lives amid adverse circumstances or crisis. If we go back in history, from the garden of Eden, we will realize that human beings' relationship with God was broken because of sin; that is, the disobedience of man to the laws established by the Creator (Genesis 3:1-24). From that conscious and voluntary act of the human will, we have lived far away from God. The Bible says: "...for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God (Romans 3:23). In other words, we rebelled and were against Him.

However, despite this hostile reaction of man towards his Creator, God took the initiative to restore his relationship with us. When Adam sinned, God decided to seek him: "But the Lord God called to the man, 'Where are you?'" (Genesis 3:9).

The apostle John spoke of the universal scope of God's love when he expressed the following: "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16). The Bible also teaches us that God's desire is for everyone to repent (1 Timothy 2:4). Jesus Christ has come to show us the way to the presence of the Father. Because of His death on the cross, we can enjoy today an intimate and personal relationship with God, just as David enjoyed it.

Often, we're cold and indifferent when it comes to our personal relationship with God. But David promised to seek the Lord at dawn with all his heart. He wasn't going to be satisfied with anything less than meeting with his God.

One of the things that shocked me the most when we were studying at the Nazarene Theological Seminary, in Buenos Aires (Argentina) was that people were always in a terrible hurry in that city. My wife and I came from a quieter and slower context. The first time we went to the city center we almost got dizzy. At the train station, we saw people like a shoal of fish; they came and went, nobody was still. Some ran to connect with other groups, others bought something to eat as they walked or a newspaper to read; and others didn't want to be late for their jobs and, therefore, went even faster, etc. And someone, seeing us so perplexed, told us that people live like this every day. People get up at dawn and go to sleep very late. Literally, there is no time to feed many of the important relationships, including the relationship with God.

It's time that we realize that if we don't keep our personal relationship with God alive; we run the risk of drying up spiritually. If we lose our vital contact with God, we can lose our spiritual lucidity. In this sense, I make my own the words of one of the authors of the book *Spiritual Formation* that says verbatim: "Spiritual development isn't personal achievement, self-help or self-discipline. It's strictly related to God" (Wesley D. Tracy, E. Dee Freeborn, Janine Tartaglia and Morris A. Weigelt. *Spiritual formation*. USA: CNP, 1999, p.17).

While in the desert, David contemplated by faith the glory of the Lord; and he experienced divine action thanks to his moments of communion with God in the sanctuary (Psalm 63:2). Thinking about this experience was a motivating delight which enabled David to face the desert with hope.

Questions:

- According to Psalm 63:1-4, what are the elements that could prevent us from having an intimate and meaningful relationship with the Lord?
- How can you overcome them?

II. David Praises God (Psalm 63:5-8)

Often, people are commanded to praise God as a duty and obviously, in this case, praise cannot depend on mood, feelings or circumstances. Job said: "Naked I came from my mother's womb and naked I will depart. The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away; may the name of the Lord be praised" (Job 1:21). This shouldn't be understood as a simple obligatory fulfillment of what has been commanded by God, but rather as a lifestyle that should characterize a child of God. This last concept is how the writer of Psalm 63 saw it. He knew that his God didn't change. His God didn't depend on the circumstances of the moment. He could be really

sure that even when he was in the middle of the desert, his mouth would praise the Lord and do it with jubilant lips (Psalm 63:5).

David experienced that communion with God satisfies the devout soul. We can look at our world today and realize that people aren't satisfied. People aren't happy with what they have, with what they earn or with what corresponds to them. Even today, many religious movements have emerged that the only thing they teach is prosperity gospel ... a gospel that never satisfies; but on the contrary, creates the need to have more. In other words, a materialistic and consumerist gospel that never satisfies. Not only this, but the supporters of this teaching have reinvented a new way of being a church ... a church that only knows how to lose, but never knows how to thank. A church that only knows how to complain, but doesn't know how to be happy in any circumstance, that is, it doesn't know how to praise God at all times.

The psalmist's words should serve as a lesson today. Despite the desert, we can be sure of God. Our communion with God satisfies us more than anything else. In the midst of the crisis, we can praise God and be sure that His right hand supports us. Our churches need a theology of contentment today, rather than one of prosperity. I don't mean by this that God cannot bless us on a material level. On the contrary, I can affirm without fear of being mistaken that it's biblical to think that God is a God of love and blessings.

But what I really want to point out is expressed in the best way by David W. Jones and Russell S. Woodbridge who expressly say the following: "Yes, God is love, he has the power to bless and provide generously for his people. However He doesn't promise material prosperity for all. On the other hand, God does promise something much better: Himself" (David W. Jones and Russell S. Woodbridge. *Health, wealth and happiness?* USA: Editorial Speaker, 2011, p.22).

When we're close to our God, with grateful hearts, the words spoken by King David take on their meaning, regardless of our immediate circumstances: "The Lord is my shepherd, I lack nothing... Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil, for you are with me..." (Psalm 23:1-4).

No grateful believers can meditate on all the benefits they have obtained from the Lord without endorsing the words of gratitude, praise and satisfaction that the psalmist used in these verses: "I will be fully satisfied as with the richest of foods; with singing lips my mouth will praise you... Because you are my help, I sing in the shadow of your wings. I cling to you; your right hand upholds me" (Psalm 63:5,7-8).

Questions:

- Regarding the passage, mention two situations in which you have experienced that only the hand of God was able to deliver you?

III. David received God's promise of Protection (Psalm 63:9-11)

David could tell what the final destination of his enemies was going to be, because he had put his hope and trust in God despite the difficulties. The last part of verse 8 reads as follows: "...your right hand upholds me." I am the pastor of one of the congregations of the Church of the Nazarene in the city of Bata (Equatorial Guinea) where we have days of counseling and prayer. What I have noticed in many of the brothers and sisters who visit our office, whether or not of our local church or denomination, is that the majority of them are full of fears. In Africa, it's common to talk about the world of spirits, liberation, witchcraft, fetishism, etc. In fact, we're known worldwide for our animistic culture. Many Africans believe that behind every object there is a spirit. Therefore, they claim that there are spirits in the sea, in the mountains, in the jungles, in the rocks, etc. If this happened only in the non-Christian world, I wouldn't worry so much. My real problem is that this situation is also frequently seen in the Christian world. Many live always thinking about how to avoid the darts of their enemies (evil spirits).

Others are looking for the fashionable prophet or apostle to sell them water, salt or protective oil. Most evangelical cults don't celebrate what Christ did for us, far from preaching the gospel of salvation and forgiveness of sins. All the time they talk about liberation, exorcism, spiritual warfare and similar practices. I discovered that this is actually an expression of insecurity and fear that is behind most of these people whose minds have

been enslaved by the enemy. If this is what happens in my country or continent, I think that in other places, the same or something similar happens, perhaps with another face.

In the midst of this reality, the psalmist's words must resound in our ears like thunder to lead us to a life of rest in the hands of the King of kings: "I cling to you; your right hand upholds me. Those who want to kill me will be destroyed; They will be given over to the sword... But the king will rejoice in God" (vv. 8-11). I don't mean by this to say that we have no enemies. We all have enemies, whether visible or invisible.

What I want to maintain is that whatever the nature of our enemies, we can be sure that the Lord will take care of us. He'll destroy them, and as David declares "their meat will be food of the jackals" (v.10). In the Scriptures, we find several promises from the Lord where He offers us His protection. For this reason, there is no reason to be worried or to live in fear. On the contrary, we can sleep in peace and sleep safely, because the Lord helps us live with confidence (Psalm 4:8).

Questions:

- Do you have any enemy or imminent threat? Comment.
- Do you consider King David's words as applying to your situation (vs. 9-11)? Comment.

Conclusion

Difficult situations in the lives of true Christians are inevitable. David's experience expressed in Psalm 63, when he was in the desert, can serve as a model. Let's seek to build an intimate and meaningful relationship with God; and learn to praise him in all circumstances; because he's our protector. Whatever our desert, the Lord will give us victory.



Why do the Wicked Prosper?

Paola C. Prera (Guatemala)

Passage to Study: Psalm 73

Memory Verse: “Surely God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart” Psalm 73:1.

Lesson Aim: To understand that the goodness of God doesn’t depend on circumstances, nor on our expectations, or on the decisions we make. God is good to His children all the time.

Introduction

Most of us aren’t in full time service for the Lord. In fact, the majority of us work in secular environments, exposing ourselves often to a hostile world, and sometimes we have to face situations where we have to live “as sheep in the midst of wolves” (Matthew 10:16).

The Lord knows that; and for that, he prayed to the Father like this: “My prayer isn’t that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one” (John 17:15). Understanding that we live in a world that isn’t compatible with our faith, way of life and love for the Lord, can help us improve our lives in various aspects. Regardless of the circumstances, we may experience what the Lord promises in His Word: “And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 4:7).

There are situations that arise in our lives as Christians due to the fact that we have differences in convictions to those around us. These situations cause unbelievers to see us as rare, old-fashioned, crazy or with little understanding. Paul said to the Corinthians: “For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it’s the power of God” (1 Corinthians 1:18).

Experiencing that devastating feeling of being treated unfairly can be difficult for the life of any believer.

I. Why Do The Wicked Prosper? (Psalm 73:2-16)

Many times, the Christian’s life is calm, quite serene, but at other times, it’s troubled, full of trials, challenges and struggles. These difficult moments or circumstances are critical since they can stop us from understanding what God is doing. The psalmist wrote: “...I envied the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked” (v.

3). It’s hard for us to accept that from someone who has received so much knowledge and love from God, but that is how the writer felt.

Those who weren’t close to God had “no struggles; their bodies are healthy and strong” (v. 4); they achieved their goals and dreams easily, almost without any struggle (v. 5); The psalmist claimed that: “the wicked are... always free of care, they go on amassing wealth” (v. 12), The balance seems to be wrong – the bad people prosper and the pure in heart don’t. He writes: “Surely in vain I have kept my heart pure and have washed my hands in innocence” (v. 13). He seems to be angry, frustrated, and discouraged because he was doing what God wanted, but it was the wicked who prospered. Desiring what the wicked have can make us fall into the worst mistake of all: doubt that salvation is the best that anyone can find.

The truth is that the wicked take advantage of everyone and everything in order to achieve their desires. Often, they act with underhand deception and tricks, like those of Satan. So, as children of God, we need to remain alert, for we can be tempted to take the easy and crooked path of the wicked. We can lose sight of the Lord, and end up in the wrong place: the apparent happiness of the wicked.

Ask: How much do we love the Lord? Are we tempted to take the easy path? How much do we struggle to help our families move forward every day with faith and hope? Have we felt the pain when someone takes advantage of our needs and hurts us even if there are no serious consequences? This can be very hard.

Some believers may be tempted to want to be like the wicked (vs. 15-16), imitate them and engage in their business, to be accepted or get some material benefit. We must be careful not to be dragged into their sins. A preacher once said: "Temptation exists; We can't avoid it. It will come, it must come. The terrible thing is when God's children yield. Of course, these feelings and thoughts can come into our lives; but are we going to let them affect us?"

In verse 2, the psalmist admits: "But as for me, my feet had almost slipped; I had nearly lost my foothold (v. 2). The writer of the psalm presented a list of thoughts and feelings provoked by seeing progress in the life of the wicked. But he also identified something that stopped him, something that prevented him from falling. The answer is found in the last verse of the Psalm, verse 28: "But as for me, it's good to be near God. I have made the Sovereign Lord my refuge; I will tell of all your deeds." (v. 28).

Questions:

- What is envy?
- Why did the Psalmist envy the arrogant?

II. The Psalmist Finds Answers (Psalm 73:1,17)

We must not let outside influences affect us as God's children. But, if we're tempted like the psalmist, what should we do? How can we avoid falling? Within this psalm, we find a few important teachings. They aren't the only ones, but they could make a difference:

A. "Surely God is good to Israel..." (v. 1). We need to keep in mind the fact that God is good to his children. The verse continues with the statement "with those who are pure in heart." Jeremiah 17:10 says: "The Lord searches the heart and examines the mind, to reward each person according to their conduct, according to what their deeds deserve."

So each of us needs to evaluate ourselves, our intentions, and ask ourselves daily, why do I do this? Why do I feel this? Why did I feel this way? Why do I want this? After answering these questions, we need to present ourselves before the Lord and submit them to Him. For even good things may have intentions that aren't correct, and with which we could also damage our relationship with the Lord. Let's work on our hearts; Let's submit it to God daily so that He can examine and cleanse our thoughts and motives by the power of His Holy Spirit.

B. The second important teaching is the constant search for the presence of God. The psalmist says: "When I tried to understand all this, it troubled me deeply till I entered the sanctuary of God; then I understood their final destiny" (vs. 16-17). In the passage, the end of the wicked is mentioned, but he wasn't able to understand until he was in the sanctuary. We will be able to understand these difficult issues when we keep a close relationship with God. Any envy we might feel for the prosperity of the wicked will go away as we gain perspective in a close relationship with God, in our private prayer sanctuaries!

Every time I have the blessing to young share with a disciple, I say the same thing: "Seek the Lord. His presence teaches us, encourages, calms, comforts, satisfies, fills us with wisdom, helps us to grow, and to see life and people as God sees them. We will learn to know ourselves better and becomes shaped by His love and wisdom."

So that our lives may be guided by the Word, let's seek the Lord. He will help us to understand.

Questions:

- What two answers does the Psalmist offer us?
- When the Bible talks about the 'heart,' to what part or parts of us does it refer?
- How can Christians keep their hearts pure?

III. Difference Between The Ungodly and The Righteous (Psalm 73:18-28)

In Christ, we have the promise of a full life on earth and an eternal life in His presence. Glory to the Lord! It's a delight to find Bible promises that assure us of this. Verse 23 says: "Yet I am always with you; you hold me by my right hand." No matter what happens around us, God is always close, supporting and guiding us as the loving Father he is. May the Lord give us the discernment to understand His Direction and love at all times.

Each moment of life is different and is constantly changing. Verse 24 states: "You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will take me into glory" (v. 24). Extraordinary promise! So, we can say together with the psalmist that our hope is in the Lord God (v. 28); and the most beautiful thing is that He won't fail us. As children of God we know this, we can live it, experience it, and enjoy it. However, what will happen to the wicked? King David wrote: "Do not fret because of those who are evil or be envious of those who do wrong" "Do not be impatient because of the evil ones, nor be envious of those who do iniquity" (Psalm 37:1).

It's common to hear that wealth, success and power don't give joy. Often, millions of dollars are wasted on trivial things, such as the case of Mark Zuckerberg (co-founder of Facebook) who in a single day lost more than fifteen million dollars due to scandals and rumors in which he had been involved.

We could continue with examples of people who apparently have "achieved everything" in their lives; but in reality, have achieved nothing (Psalm 73:18). Salvation never took place in their gluttonous hearts, eager for more; ambitious and violent, they lost the wonderful opportunity to live an eternity with God.

The end of the wicked will be God's judgement. So, all the temporal rewards and riches don't have a lasting effect - they are temporary and trivial. Even though they may seem happy, they aren't. The difference between an impious person and a righteous one lies mainly in the issue of salvation. Those who have put God to one side won't fare well, while those of us who have a close relationship with the Lord, trusting in Him and seeking His help in life's paths and decisions, will enjoy eternal salvation.

For a person justified by the blood of Christ, the external ceases to be the most important. Also, problems and pain may exist in our lives, in common with everyone, but the righteous aren't alone, for God's rod and staff will lead them (Psalm 23:4).

Even more wonderful is that "...we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose" (Romans 8:28). It's important that every child of God remember that no matter what happens, at the end of the trials and troubles, we will have grown in the knowledge of God's grace. So, often when an event seems like a tragedy, and even when it really is, God will be there, helping us with the course of our life, giving us the strength to avoid the problem, or saving us from something worse. That's why in this lesson we emphasize that we need to renew our trust and understanding of the grace of the Lord.

Some time ago, I worked for a company where I really liked what I was doing. Personally, I considered that I was contributing to make it more productive; I did it because I felt that it was pleasing the Lord. This company was made up of people who for many years had been close to each other and their relationships were very close. However, they didn't have much preparation to develop their functions. Generally, when I work, I seek to contribute even in areas that aren't necessarily my direct responsibility. I like to feel useful for the Lord and for others. The person who was my immediate boss promised me a long and stable job due

to my good performance and the trust he had placed in me. This caused some discontent in some people. So one day, without clearly understanding why, my employment contract was canceled. This shattered me. I wasn't given any reason for this decision. In that period of time, my husband had to leave the company where he worked, and this reality put us in a difficult situation. I cannot deny it. I was deeply mortified. I felt I was living an unfair situation. Those people couldn't understand the damage they had caused my family. I remember that I envied the life that some of them enjoyed because of the relationship they had with the owner, and not so much because of their work performance. I saw them take pride in harming me and treating me in the worst way I have experienced at work level. So, Psalm 73 reminds me a lot of that time in my life, the moments I lived, and the remembrance of the people's faces that had hurt me. Even today, they enjoy (apparently) a happy life.

I prayed a lot, asking the Lord for direction. I wondered: "What can I do so that my family will be ok?" And I also prayed that the Lord would show me if I had failed in something so that I could improve in that area. Today, I pray for those who hurt me so that one day they can find salvation.

The Lord worked miracles a few days later in the life of my family. Now, I know that He freed me from future events that were going to happen in that company. Also, He took care of our circumstances. Soon, I had a new employment contract that helped me bring what I needed to my home. My husband had a very nice opportunity to develop, and at present we have high hopes because the Lord is always good. But I know that at that moment when I was sad, I couldn't understand what was happening. Those were days of sadness. Now, I glorify the Lord because in that situation, I understood that He's good with His children, and not just in the midst of problems, but at all times.

Questions:

- Describe the difference between the ungodly and the righteous.
- According to the passage studied, what is the end of the wicked?
- Have you had any experiences like this in the work place. Share them.

Conclusion

Always keep in mind that God is good to those with clean hearts, and that our end will be glorious, sharing the riches of the wonderful Lord Jesus Christ.



God Hears Our Prayers

Ely Camas Pérez (Mexico)

Passage to Study : Psalm 83

Memory Verse: “Let them know that you, whose name is the Lord — that you alone are the Most High over all the earth” Psalm 83:18.

Lesson Aim: To learn to depend on God in prayer at all times with the assurance that God will always answer.

Introduction

The Psalmist presented a very detailed description of the times when God’s people were threatened or attacked, and couldn’t face this in their own military strength. They had had to turn to God immediately, and present their requests clearly and precisely.

Psalm 83 has two very notorious divisions: 1) Verses 1 through 8, in which the call to God is presented, and the problem that was approaching the people of Israel is described. 2) Verses 9 through 18 present a call of the people to God, in which they stated what they hoped He would do. This leads us to understand that this psalm is considered “imprecatory” (a request that God would take revenge against the enemies of his people).

It’s worth noting that the revenge requested wasn’t only to vindicate the people or the person; It was also to revindicate the good name of the Lord. This type of psalm also seems to be in opposition to the words of Jesus Christ in the New Testament, but it’s good to note that in the Old Testament, the Israelites frequently spoke of Jehovah’s wrath against peoples who didn’t live under the law of God and who profaned His name.

I. The Reason for Israel’s Prayer (Psalm 83:1-8)

A. There came a time that they thought they were alone (vs. 1-3)

The psalmist began with an urgent cry, asking the Lord, whom they considered in this psalm as a passive God, not to remain silent before their enemies. The first reaction of God’s children is to think that He’s not listening. We constantly expects quick answers, and thus, show that we like to try to manage God’s times and the ways in which He should listen and respond.

It’s important to note how the psalmist used possessive adjectives and personal second-person pronouns in verses 2 and 3: “you, you and you.” This is to highlight that those who attacked God’s people were attacking the Lord directly; the enemies of His people were His enemies. Likewise, these adjectives and pronouns teach us that when enemies try to destroy God’s people, in reality they’re attacking God himself, although perhaps they don’t see it in that light.

B. The way in which the enemies of God’s people act (v. 3)

Verse 3 says: “With cunning they conspire against your people; they plot against those you cherish.” The enemies of God’s people have always used dark ways to destroy them. Thus in history we see that they have used all kinds of cunning. Also at the beginning of Christianity, we know that Emperor Nero used his absolute power to try to destroy Christians by accusing them of burning Rome. Even right now, the church suffers attacks from governments which use all kinds of cunning to prohibit the preaching of the values of the Kingdom.

In Numbers 22, we find how Balak, king of Moab, wanted to bring Balaam to curse the people of God. Verse 17 says: “because I will reward you handsomely and do whatever you say. Come and put a curse on these people for me.” Many of the enemies of God’s people not only want to destroy, they are also investing money to carry out these purposes. In some cases, they use people in the service of God to achieve their ends.

C. A coalition to attack God’s people (vs. 4-8)

It’s interesting to see how the enemies of God were able to unite against the Israelites. (v. 4) The Psalmist presents a long list of these enemies: the Edomites, the Ishmaelites, Moabites and the Hagrites, the people of Byblos, the Ammonites and the Amalekites, the Philistines and the people of Tyre. Even the Assyrians joined them to reinforce Lot’s descendants. (vs. 6-8).

In the call to destroy the people of God, all these peoples are mentioned, and although they were enemies of each other, they had something in common ... a desire to destroy God's people. Throughout the Old Testament, we see that the nations around them wanted to destroy Israel. Joshua 11:1-5 tells us how a group of kings and their people went out to fight against Israel to destroy them; and in 2 Samuel 8, we also read how pagan peoples united to fight against Israel. So, we can discover in many other biblical passages that this was repeated constantly.

It's interesting to note that in all Latin American countries, whether the political parties are described as of the right, the left, or the center, when it comes to passing laws that go against biblical principles, it doesn't matter which side they are on in their political ideology, they join and vote for laws contrary to those the Christian church preached for centuries.

Right now, there are threats against the church, as God's people, regarding gender ideology and the pressure of the gay lobby. In the name of the freedom of the human being, governments pass laws contrary to the freedoms of other human beings. If the churches raises their voice, they are said to be homophobic or retrograde. The political parties in power have difficulties agreeing on many matters, but in one voice attack the church.

Questions:

- According to verses 1 through 8, how should we approach God in prayer?
- What should the Lord's church do when enemies come together to attack it?

II. A Very Strong Prayer (Psalm 83:9-18)

The psalmist continued to remember what God had done with other kings and nations in the past, in favor of His people.

A. Remember God's great victories

The Israelites asked that God would set them free, as he did when he delivered them from Midian (Judges 7:1-27). On that occasion, God's power was manifested in a spectacular way, for only 300 men were enough for God to confuse his enemies. Judges 7:12 says that both Midianites and Amalekites were numerous.

The psalmist also asked God to act as he did against Sisera and Jabin, when they had been afraid of their chariots and army of 900 soldiers. Again God led them out to gain victory (Judges 4:13-14). In that same chapter of Judges, verse 16 relates that there was no one left from Sisera's army; and in the end, Jabin was destroyed too.

It's very illustrative that these two cases are mentioned in the book of Judges. Also, that in the first case, they were delivered without the people of Israel using their armed forces, and that in the second case, it was a woman, Deborah, who led the battle, even in a society where women didn't go to war.

This teaches us that we shouldn't lose sight of what God has done throughout history, and how he has intervened in favor of His people, because this reaffirms our faith and the faith of the following generations.

B. Why does God destroy their enemies? (V. 12)

Psalm 83:12 tells the motives of the enemies: "Let us take possession of the pasture lands of God." We must consider this expression from two perspectives.

Firstly: the enemies were against the people of God and as a result, they had proposed in their hearts to take over the lands that the people of Israel had. In church history, we see the Caesars of Rome who sought to destroy the Christians in the Roman Colosseum, killing as many of them as possible. More recently, we found people who wanted to do something similar, like Hitler, who arranged in his heart to destroy completely the people of Israel, killing more than 6 million Jews.

Secondly: they put themselves above God. Since sin entered mankind, human beings have always accused the Lord of their evils. Mankind has created their own rules, generating their own values, and in this obsession of wanting to be God, have made decisions contrary to the will of the Lord.

It's interesting to observe in the analysis of Psalm 83:12 how those peoples wanted to be heirs of God's dwellings. Ask: How can we see this expression in relation to us? Today, some people or governments have wanted to appropriate the real estate that belongs to the church and, therefore, to the Lord; but He has always fought those battles for His people and the church has regained their own properties.

C. The curse (vs. 13-16)

Imprecatory (curse) prayers were what God's people made against their enemies. When Christ came, his teachings were so very different. Jesus taught us to love those who hurt us and forgive the offenses we receive, knowing that God has control and that His is responsible for any revenge. As children of God, we must act as the Lord taught (Matthew 5:43-44), and as the apostle Paul applied in Romans 12:20.

In this prayer we find in Psalm 83, the psalmist asked that those enemies of God be completely destroyed. Psalm 89 is very similar to this. Everything seems to be only a matter of revenge, when in reality, they are psalms that expressed the pain of God's people, and also reflected the great confidence that they had in God. They are demanding the justice that God had promised them.

The psalmist uses language similar to that of Isaiah (Isaiah 9:18-19), where the prophet also declared that God would act against evil. Here are very important questions we need to ask: How should the church pray at this time in the face of the attacks it's constantly receiving? Can you only ask for prayer of blessing for enemies? Is it valid for Christians to ask God to destroy the enemies of His people?

Possibly, the previous questions generate a debate, but in the end, we must make it clear that the church wasn't commanded to pray for the destruction of its enemies, but is entrusted to pray for the destruction of evil plans. Likewise, we must pray for God to change the heart of the enemy, and thus be sensitive to the voice of the Lord.

D. A sublime purpose in prayer

Verse 16 shows the real purpose of the prayer: "Cover their faces with shame, Lord, so that they will seek your name." This is repeated in verse 18: "Let them know that you, whose name is the Lord — that you alone are the Most High over all the earth."

At the beginning of this psalm, God's people came to Him because they were afraid because their enemies wanted to destroy them. Therefore, they came in distress and asked for divine intervention in a fearful manner, so that their enemies wouldn't win and would be destroyed. Only in the end, in the last three verses, did the psalmist write a missionary prayer. For

what had God called the people of Israel? Only to be the chosen people, a people that would receive God's blessings and enjoy His protection, no matter what they did? From when God called Abraham (Genesis 12:3), the Bible tells us that there was a purpose, which was that through Israel, the other peoples would be blessed. However, the Israelites themselves many times fell into the deception of the idolatrous practices of the nations that were around them, forgetting God and the purpose for which they were created

Human beings have been totally separated from God and we act resolutely outside the divine parameters because we don't recognize God as our Lord. One of the tasks of the church today is to pray for God's intervention when someone is trying to destroy His people. We also need to consider that we have a missionary responsibility even towards those who are opposing us. They too need to know God as their Savior and Lord.

Questions:

- What is the importance of remembering what God has done in the past in favor of his people?
- Should the church cry out with prayers of cursing against those who oppress or try to destroy them? Why or why not?

Conclusion

Throughout history, God's people have suffered battles of all kinds. Societies have sought in one way or another to attack them with the purpose of destroying them. This, like everything else, is a consequence of sin in the human race. However, in the midst of all this, we must remember that as God's people, we can and should cry out in prayer when they attack us, pleading with God to act because of His great love for His church.

Passage to Study: Psalm 91

Memory Verse: “Because he loves me,” says the Lord, “I will rescue him; I will protect him, for he acknowledges my name” Psalm 91:14.

Lesson Aim: To know we have divine protection, and cling to this promise.

Introduction

Can we trust God's protection? A mother and her four-year-old daughter were getting ready for bed. The girl was afraid of the dark and, on that occasion, alone with just her mother, she also felt somewhat frightened. When the light went out, the girl saw the moon through the window, and said to her mother: “Mommy, I want you to tell me, is the moon God's light?” The mother replied: “Yes, little daughter.” Then the girl asked, “Will God turn off His light to sleep?” The mother replied: “No, my daughter. God never falls asleep.” Then, with all the simplicity of her childhood faith, the girl said: “Well, if God is awake; I'm not afraid”.

Miguel Limardo says that the presence of God alone in the hearts of those who fear him is enough to keep fear away from us (Open Windows. Nazarene Publishing house).

I. Solid affirmations about divine protection (Psalm 91:1-2)

Twenty-seven words from these two verses (vs. 1-2) make up a statement that is unparalleled:

A. “Whoever dwells in the shelter of the Most High” (v. 1a)

We can express this in another way: whoever knows how to enter into God's refuge, who has a close relationship with Him. What is this person like? It's someone who has recognized God as the owner of their life and has accepted God as their Creator, King and Lord. An unbeliever or a rebellious person can never know what it means to have an intimate relationship with God. In this text, to dwell is to live in the ‘shelter’ of the Most High. The Lord Jesus mentioned this in his sad lament over Jerusalem: “Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together,

as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you weren't willing” (Matthew 23:37) We see in this God's interest in caring for and protecting us.

I trust that everyone who takes part in this lesson will realize in their lives the wonderful care that our heavenly Father, our Lord Jesus Christ, and the wonderful guidance of the Holy Spirit promise us.

B. “... will rest in the shadow of the Almighty” (v. 1b)

Here the Psalmist invites us to rest in God's shadow. In the heat of the Mediterranean sun, the rocks provided cool shadows for the weary travelers to rest. God invites us to have a permanent attitude of restfulness. Both the ‘shelter’ (v.1a) and the ‘rest’ (v. 1b) offer us respite from the stresses and difficulties that twenty-first century everyday life throws at us.

C. Statement of trust (v. 2)

Verse 2 states: “...He is my refuge and my fortress, my God, in whom I trust.” The psalmist expresses here something very powerful, we can trust God even in times of terrible trials. We can trust Him because He gives us refuge – a safe place, and he says that He's our fortress. He's the rock of our salvation.

Questions:

- What are the conditions for receiving God's protection?
- Name two reasons why you're sure that God protects you.
- Tell about an extraordinary personal experience of when God delivered you from evil.

II. Description of God's sweet and wonderful protection (Psalm 91:3-13)

A. Eight figures of God's protection (vv. 3-6)

From verse 3 to 6, the psalmist uses eight figures to describe how God acts to protect His children. These were taken from the actions or experiences of the daily, community or national life of Israel of those times. He promise to save us from:

1. **"...The fowler's snare"** (v. 3a). Here he's describing how in hunting, fowlers used a contrivance often consisting of a noose for entangling birds or mammals. Who tries to snare us? We're faced with worldly temptations and of course, the most cunning hunter of souls is the devil himself.
2. **"...from the deadly pestilence"** (v. 3b). In all of history there have been pandemics of serious diseases that are mortal in nature. We have experienced a few in recent years such as Ebola and the different strains of flu. These deadly diseases have killed thousands and thousands of people. Israel wasn't the exception; That is why the psalmist mentioned it here.
3. **Protected under His wings** (v. 4a) The psalmist writes: "He will cover you with his feathers, and under his wings you will find refuge (v. 4a). This is a beautiful picture of how a mother bird protects her chicks.
4. **"...shield and rampart"** (v. 4b). The shield was used to protect against arrows or the attacks of the sword etc. A rampart is a wall that acts as a defensive or protective barrier.
5. **"...the terror of night"** (v. 5a). There is a natural fear of what might happen during the night as darkness hides actions of bad people who want to do us harm. God tells us that we shouldn't be afraid of them.
6. **"...the arrow that flies by day"** (v. 5b). Here the psalmist refers to the dart or arrow that is shot by an archer with a bow. It's extremely dangerous, flies hard, and is often poisoned; Just a small prick could be fatal.
7. **"...the pestilence that stalks in the darkness"** (v. 6a). Pestilence means a deadly and overwhelming disease that affects an entire community. Something like the black plague that killed thousands of people in the medieval times, or like Covid 19 today.

8. **"...nor the plague that destroys at midday"** (v. 6b). Mortality generally occurs in the wars. It can also be due to natural phenomena such as hurricanes, eddies, floods or heavy and continuous rains.

B. Extraordinary things that God will do to protect us (vs. 7-13)

The Psalm mentions extraordinary acts that God will do to protect us:

1. **Save us from death in the midst of battle** (v. 7). Although many people die in battle, the Lord promises that death won't come near us. A thousand may fall at your side,
2. **Free from evil and plagues** (v. 10). Evil here could mean those things that bother us and don't let us live in peace. True tranquility comes from having peace with God, and being totally consecrated to Him.
3. **Angels will be sent to protect us** (vs. 11-12). The psalmist affirms that this will be done by the Lord so that our feet won't stumble on the stones. Many of us have walked along difficult paths; we have stumbled on stones and we have also sunk into the mud. Many itinerant preachers have had some difficult journeys in their evangelistic missions. Paul suffered many things (2 Corinthians 11:16-33). However, God promises to take care of us.
4. **Step on fierce and poisonous beasts** (v. 13). This expression is hyperbolic. We all know that it's not a good idea to go around treading on snakes or lions. What the Psalm is underlining is that God is there with us whatever the situation that we have to deal with. We have to trust in Him. Who, in their right mind, would try to step on a lion, a venomous snake or a dragon? But a child of God can do it, if God so commands or allows it, without danger of his life, because God is our safety net, our refuge if we put our trust in Him.

Questions:

- Name the different things that God promises to protect the Psalmist from?
- What do you think might be the equivalent today?
- In your reality, what would God's protection be like for your community or city?

III. Final divine provision (Psalm 91:14-16)

Verse 14 states: "Because he loves me," says the Lord, "I will rescue him; I will protect him, for he acknowledges my name." Here we see something very important - there is a condition, we must love God and acknowledge His name. For those who have put their love in God, He declares the following:

A. God promises to rescue the psalmist (v. 14b)

God promises to 'rescue him' because he has placed his trust in God. Divine action will be there to protect him, and free him from dangers, pandemics, natural misfortunes.

"... I will protect him, for he acknowledges my name." Once again, the condition is clear. God promises to rescue those who acknowledge Him. It comes back to the first verse of the psalm. We need to continue to have a close relationship with God, recognizing that He's the only one who deserves our worship and praise and our obedient consecration.

B. Interact with them in worship (v.15)

This interaction of God is seen in three very brief statements that God made to the Psalmist but which are still relevant for us today:

1. **"He will call on me, and I will answer him"** (v. 15a). As the mother told her little daughter "God never sleeps". So, He invites us to call to Him and He promises to answer.
2. **"I will be with him in trouble"** (v. 15b). At some time in our lives, we will have to suffer anguish. We all have to go through those difficult moments.

It's part of being human. We don't like it but the wonderful thing is that God promises to be with us when we're troubled.

3. **"...I will deliver him and honor him"** (v. 15c). This statement is a reiteration of verses 3 and 14. God wants His children to live in freedom in the center of His will.

C. Satisfy them with a long life (v. 16)

Verse 16 says: "With long life I will satisfy him and show him my salvation." The Bible tells us that God created the first couple to live with Him, but their disobedience took away that blessed privilege. At this point, we see that God's plans can be hindered, but not eliminated. He established a plan so that we could live forever with Him. He sent His son Jesus to die on the cross, bearing our sins, so that by believing in Him, we will be free from all condemnation and live eternally with Him.

Questions:

- What three things does God promise to the Psalmist?
- Once again what are God's conditions?

Conclusion

One of the things we want most is security. God knows about this longing, and satisfies it with all the promises he gives us in Psalm 91. All of us must stop trusting in ourselves and begin to love God, believe in Him, and place all our trust in Him. This psalm is like a spiritual balm to help eliminate our anxieties, calm our fears, and ensure our continued divine protection.



Wise Advice Against Idolatry

Joel Castro (Spain)

Passage to Study: Psalm 115

Memory Verse: “Do not turn to idols or make metal gods for yourselves. I am the Lord your God” Leviticus 19:4.

Lesson Aim: To understand the nature of idolatry and the correct meaning of trusting in God.

Introduction

According to biblical commentators, Psalm 115 belongs to a section of songs that were used to praise God on Jewish holidays and in the Temple. This psalm begins with the exaltation of God and the denial of all praise for man. The writer’s desire was that no man would steal the glory due to God. Commonly, humans want applause for their actions, but Psalm 115 calls us to render all worship, praise and glory only to God, even if we ourselves have achieved something. The first verse says: “Not to us, Lord, not to us but to your name be the glory, because of your love and faithfulness.” If we have been able to do something that is worthy of praise, it’s because God in his inexhaustible love and faithfulness has allowed us to achieve it.

“No to us” is a renunciation of self-worship that is a type of idolatry. By nature, we want to render worship, although sometimes, erroneously, we give it to ourselves or other gods. The pagan nations, seeing that the Jews refused self-worship and didn’t have an idol system like they had, wondered: Where is your God now? (Psalm 115:2b). That is, who do these Jews worship? Pagans need to see their god to worship it, as can be seen today in the system of Catholic saints.

The psalmist answers the question by showing four serious ideas to be kept in mind if we want to please God. This advice contains replies to the idolatry of the world. Let’s analyze this wise advice:

I. A serious warning: Idols are futile (Psalm 115:4-8)

For the psalmist, our God is omnipresent and omnipotent. Even though his presence lies in heaven, He has all power on earth: Verse 3 says: “Our God is in heaven; he does whatever pleases him.” On this basis he warns us that idols are futile; and gives us his reasons:

A. Idols are senseless (vs. 5-7)

One of the warnings, perhaps the main one, that God gave to the people of Israel before entering the promised land, was the following: “drive out all the inhabitants of the

land before you. Destroy all their carved images and their cast idols, and demolish all their high places” (Numbers 33:52). And even more, the second commandment that came through Moses was against idolatry (Exodus 20:4-5).

Unfortunately, many of the people were led astray by the idolatry of neighboring nations. Many of these idols were carved from wood or were made of plaster or metal. They also looked like animals, or a human body and an animal head, etc. To all these carved images, or idols made of gold and silver, the psalmist exclaimed the following:

- “They have mouths, but cannot speak...” (v. 5a). God himself spoke and communicated His will but the idols of the heathen were dumb.
- “... they have eyes, but they don’t see” (v. 5b). The idols had eyes which were mere holes in the plaster or metal. However, the most high God goes before His servants and anticipates what will come, because He’s a God who sees the present and the future.
- “They have ears, but cannot hear...” (v. 6a). How can they hear the cry of their followers? Calling out to them is like talking to the wall. The most anecdotal case of idolatry is found in 1 Kings 18:20-40. On that occasion, Elijah challenged the followers of Baal and Asera (Phoenician idols). They cried all day asking their gods to send them fire, but nothing happened, because although idols had the shape of ears, they couldn’t hear. On the contrary, Elijah prayed and the Lord of heaven heard and answered.
- “... they have noses, but they can’t smell” (v. 6b). All the incense and smoke from multiple sacrifices was lost on these idols whose noses couldn’t smell. How sad for the idol worshipper who had spent so much money on bouquets and incense to later realize that they were wasting their money. On the contrary, our God perceives our worship and praise and he enjoys it.

- "...They have hands, but cannot feel" (v. 7a). Idols cannot touch their followers. It's a mockery to adorn their arms, since they cannot even raise a finger. Deuteronomy says: "the LORD your God brought you out of there with a mighty hand" (5:15).
- "... they have feet, but they don't walk ..." (v. 7b). This is the last straw! The idols "like" to be carried about by their followers because they can't walk by themselves. Catholic processions are an example of this sad reality. However, the writer of Deuteronomy stated that "the LORD your God is the one who goes with you to fight for you against your enemies to give you victory" (20:4). Glory to God!
- They cannot "utter a sound with their throats..." (v. 7c). Small insects make more noise than any of these idols. Patient Job affirmed that "For God does speak—now one way, now another..." (33:14). For such is the power of God.

B. Those who make them are like them (v. 8)

Isaiah 44:9 expresses the folly of idolatry: "All who make idols are nothing, and the things they treasure are worthless. Those who would speak up for them are blind; they are ignorant, to their own shame." Actually, idol carvers know that their work is futile and useless; Idolatry is a cunning plot of the devil. Those who make idols are motivated by the fact that they can make a handsome profit out of people's religious observances. This system still continues in our day.

Psalm 115:8 ends by saying: "Those who make them will be like them, and so will all who trust in them." Unfortunately, an idol is comparable to its maker because of its uselessness. Just as we, who worship a true God, want to be more like our God, the idol worshipper becomes like his/her idol, useless and vain.

Questions:

- In your view, what do you understand about idolatry?
- In addition to the saints, what other type of idolatry do we find today?

II. A serious demand: Trust in God (Psalm 115:9-11)

After the effort made by the psalmist to reveal the true state of idols, he made a serious demand to the people: trusting the Lord is better, way better. We can see an example of this in the case of Daniel's three friends: Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego (Daniel 3). These friends were faced with a dangerous situation; but they had their firm principles and faith, and refused to bend their knees before Nebuchadnezzar's god. On the contrary, they trusted the Lord even at a high cost (Daniel 3:16-19). Ask: Who are we trusting today? Perhaps some of us

are part of the public the psalmist addressed; because the public to whom the psalmist addressed were people in general. Let's see what groups this was made of, and what he told them:

A. To the people of Israel: "all you Israelites, trust in the Lord ..." (v. 9)

Israel was the people chosen by God, a people who were born from the thought and heart of God. Going after other gods was a betrayal of their Creator and Maker. The great demand is this: "Set aside these idols that are of no use to you. Israel trust in God."

B. To the priests: "House of Aaron, trust in the Lord ..." (v. 10)

Although today all of us who belong to Christ are priests (1 Peter 2:9), at that time, the priests served exclusively in the temple. Unfortunately, many priests in the psalmist's time had deviated from true worship of God. Aaron himself was a clear example of this when he commanded the people to prepare a golden calf in the name of God (Exodus 32). This didn't please the Lord. Idolatrous worshipers prefer to have an image in front of them for their worship. However, Jesus said to the Samaritan woman that "... true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and in truth ..." (John 4:23).

Today, as priests of Christ, we must be very careful of the stealthy way in which the devil wants to divert us from true worship of God. We may not have physical idols like statues, but we adopt idols of flesh and blood, like preachers, singers, etc., or sacred things like the Bible, the cross, the dove, etc. For example, the cross is a symbol of salvation, but it's not a means of salvation. The same goes for the Bible that people reverence and even leave open at Psalm 91 in their sitting room, but often they never read or obey what it says.

C. To all worshipers: "Those who fear the Lord, trust in the Lord ..." (v. 11)

This verse seems to include people who weren't Jews (cf. verse 9), foreigners who, without being Jewish by birth, were added to the people of Israel, and loved and honored God. Just like us, who aren't Jews by birth, but fear and honor God. It may be something illogical for someone to say, "I fear God," and be an idolater. However, even in our times, we can confuse our fear of God with idolatry. The devil is very cunning, and can lead us to misrepresent our trust in God.

When our life isn't accompanied by prayer and His Word, we're very fragile, often moving away from living by faith to living by reason, enjoying our comforts and maintaining a religious veneer. This happened to the Laodicean church that turned from being a fervent church in spirit to being a spiritually lukewarm church (Revelation 3:14-22).

For example, work can become our god. We need to pray more to our God, who provided it for us. Therefore, if we say that we fear God, we have to place our trust totally in Him. Be willing to live for Him, and with Him at all times.

Each verse of Psalm 115:9-11 ends by telling us: "He is their help and shield." In this expression, there are two reasons why we have to trust God, and not the gods who do nothing for us. The greatest help we have received from God has been to get us out of the mud of our sin, and save us. And the best shield is when he protects us from devilish tricks. An idol needs to be protected and helped. On the contrary, God protects us and helps us because we're special to Him.

Questions:

- Just as Daniel's three friends didn't worship Nebuchadnezzar's idol, what other biblical character tells us about faithfulness to God before idolatry?
- What were the three groups whom the psalmist named, and in which of these groups are you? Comment.

III. A serious promise: True blessing (Psalm 115:12-15)

If we put our absolute trust in the Maker of heaven and earth, surely we will also have his blessing. Ephesus was a very idolatrous city. There they had the goddess Diana as their guardian of the city, and to her sumptuous temple they came from all over Asia to worship her. Thus, all that region was given to worship her, until one day Paul arrived preaching the message of Christ. After listening to his message, many believed in the Lord. This fact brought much opposition and anger on the part of the artisans and followers of the goddess Diana (Acts 19:1-41). But the missionaries of that first century trusted the Lord and were freed from the mob.

Years later, Paul wrote to the brothers and sisters of the church in Ephesus who had converted from idols to the only true God through Jesus Christ. He mentioned a list of spiritual blessings they had earned through their profession of faith. That is, by choosing Christ and not idols, they had received, as have we, the following blessings (Ephesians 1:1-13): a heavenly place (v. 3), to be adopted as His children (v. 5), have redemption through his blood and forgiveness of sins (v. 7), be overabundant in wisdom and intelligence (v. 8), attain knowledge of God's will (v. 9), be His heirs (v. 11), bring praise to God's glory (v. 12), and receiving the seal of the Holy Spirit (v. 13).

Psalm 115:13 says: "...he will bless those who fear the Lord— small and great alike." So, the blessings of God are for everyone - the young and the old, who renounce their gods to serve the true God. God's blessings are

overabundant. There are many paragraphs in the Bible in which the blessings of God are mentioned. In Psalm 115:12-15, His blessings are mentioned six times. If we remain faithful to Jehovah, He will also increase His blessings for us and for our children. Psalm 115:14 says: "May the Lord cause you to flourish, both you and your children"

Questions:

- In your view, what do you think are the divine blessings that have come to you?
- Do you think the promised and true blessings are material? Comment.

IV. A serious decision: A call to praise His name (Psalm 115:16-18)

No one in the world, or above in the heavens, or below earth or under the waters, or anywhere else, deserves worship; this belongs exclusively to almighty God. Worshipping any creature or object is a sacrilege and a desecration of the name of God. Today, Jesus Christ is the owner of all our worship. He's the owner of the heavens. Verse 16 states: "The highest heavens belong to the Lord but the earth he has given to mankind."

We must not make anything here on earth a god. Our ancestors fell into pantheism, worshipping the sun, water, moon, etc. But, we're simply stewards of what He has given us while we live.

The psalmist says we should praise God while we live; because once we die, our praise won't be heard, since "It's not the dead who praise the Lord, those who go down to the place of silence" (Psalm 115:17).

Worship of God is silenced by idolatry; but worship of the true God goes on into eternity. "It's we who extol the Lord, both now and forevermore. Praise the LORD" (v. 18). We're called to worship God, we must decide.

Questions:

- According to pantheism, what gods did our ancestors worship?
- According to this fourth point, what words would you say today in praise to God?

Conclusion

Idolatry is the most common sin in the Old and New Testaments, and still continues into our present times. The warning is clear: "Do not turn to idols ..." (Leviticus 19:4). Perhaps, we don't worship plaster idols of saints or virgins, but other things like family, work or hobbies become our idols! We must not allow anything or anyone to steal time and glory due to God. Let's be true worshipers of God in spirit and truth (John 4:24).



Placing Our Trust In God

Imelda Tafur (Peru)

Passage to Study: Psalm 125

Memory Verse: “Those who trust in the Lord are like Mount Zion, which cannot be shaken but endures forever” Psalm 125:1.

Lesson Aim: To recognize the way in which God protects the righteous, and learn to trust Him more.

Introduction

“A Song of Ascents” is a collection of 15 Psalms (from 120 to 134). These Psalms were sung by the Jews who traveled to Jerusalem to celebrate the three great annual feasts ordained by God: The Passover or The Festival of Unleavened Bread (liberation), The Festival of Weeks (thanksgiving), and The Festival of Tabernacles (God’s faithfulness) (Exodus 23:14-17; Deuteronomy 16:1-17). These psalms express the reflection of pilgrims who are away from home, seeking peace, protection, provision, help and safety on their way to the temple.

Jerusalem is known as Mount Zion. It’s located on a hill, (about 700 or 1000 meters) above sea level. Because of its elevation, travelers always went ‘up’ to Jerusalem (John 2:13). Psalm 125 belongs to this collection, and without a doubt, in the development of this lesson we will identify with the thoughts, feelings, needs and convictions of these traveling Jews, and the divine protection we can receive while on pilgrimage in this world.

I. God gives security to the righteous (Psalm 125:1-2)

The psalm is a song of joy for the security that God offers to those who walk in integrity.

A. Who are the righteous?

The righteous are those who practice justice. Noah was a ‘righteous man’ who walked with God (Gen. 6:9); Abraham “... believed the Lord, and He credited it to him as righteousness” (Gen. 15:6; Rom. 4:3). Righteousness is received by faith, by learning what is taught about it and then putting it into practice. It’s enjoyed on the basis of a special relationship of communion with God (Habakkuk 2:4). Isaiah said: “The path of the righteous is level; you, the Upright One, make the way of the righteous smooth” (Isaiah 26:7). Paul confirmed it: “He did it to demonstrate His righteousness at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus” (Rom. 3:26). Through faith in Christ, we receive God’s justification and His grace enables us to live justly and righteously.

B. God’s promises for the righteous (vs. 1-2)

1. *Rest and stability.* “Those who trust in the Lord are like Mount Zion...” (v. 1).

The psalmist compares right-living to mount Zion. Mountains symbolize permanence and strength; They don’t move around but stay put. Therefore, if believers ‘trust in the Lord’ and remain firm in the new life in Christ, they won’t be defeated by the adversities of life.

Paul knew whom he believed in, and how powerful the risen Christ was (2 Timothy 1:12). His life was transformed on the road to Damascus where he was given the mission of bringing the gospel to the Gentiles (Acts 9:15).

God protects those who trust in Him. If we stop to review the history of the church, our family, or our own history, we will find countless reasons to continue trusting in God. He never abandons his own.

2. *Constant security.* “As the mountains surround Jerusalem, so the Lord surrounds his people both now and forevermore.” (Psalm 125:2).

Just as the mountains permanently surround the holy city guaranteeing its safety, God assured His presence to Jerusalem through Zechariah: “‘And I myself will be a wall of fire around it,’ declares the Lord, ‘and I will be its glory within’” (Zechariah 2:5). He dwells in the hearts of the righteous, and they exclaim with certainty along with the psalmist: “For you have been my hope, Sovereign Lord, my confidence since my youth” (Psalm 71:5).

C.H. Spurgeon said: “Outside of God there is no security. The Lord is around the righteous to deliver them from all the snares, attacks and incursions of the enemy. Above us is heaven; on both sides He’s a wall; beneath us He’s like a firm rock upon which we find ourselves, so that we’re safe and secure everywhere” (Spurgeon, Charles. David’s treasure, volume II. Spain: Editorial CLIE, 1983, pp. 369-370, translated from the Spanish).

God surrounds and protects us. The words that the Lord said to Abraham show this: “Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your very great reward” (Genesis 15:1). Likewise, God gives us rest (Psalm 4:8, 23:1-2), refuge (Psalm 92:1-2) and strength.

Jeremiah testified: “But the Lord is with me like a mighty warrior; so, my persecutors will stumble and not prevail. They will fail and be thoroughly disgraced; their dishonor will never be forgotten” (Jeremiah 20:11). He’s like the largest and highest mountain range that surrounds Zion. Isaiah prophesied the following in Jerusalem during a time of peril: “So this is what the Sovereign Lord says: ‘See, I lay a stone in Zion, a tested stone, a precious cornerstone for a sure foundation; the one who relies on it will never be stricken with panic’” (Isaiah 28:16). This main, chosen and valuable stone is Christ, and whoever believes, trusts and hopes on Him will never be ashamed or disappointed (Romans 10:11). He has promised to be with the righteous every day until the end of the world (Matthew 28:20).

Questions:

- Who are the righteous, and what are their characteristics?
- Those who trust in God enjoy tranquility and stability. Can you mention some other reasons to continue trusting God and be grateful?

II. God protects the righteous (Psalm 125:3)

A. God puts an end to the tyranny of the oppressor (v. 3a)

“The scepter of the wicked won’t remain over the land allotted to the righteous...” (v. 3a). The Bible testifies to God’s mercy in favor of Israel and those who remain faithful.

1. God takes great care of his people.

When Pharaoh oppressed the Israelites, they cried out and God heard their groan. He came down to deliver them and lead them to the land flowing with milk and honey (Exodus 3:8): “So the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with great terror and with signs and wonders” (Deuteronomy 26:8). He also assured them that He would fight for them (Exodus 14:14).

However, Israel turned away from God, directed and placed her trust in foreign nations. These nations were characterized by their cruelty, for when they took their scepter of impiety they attacked Zion, the city of the great king to humble and destroy her. God, Father of Israel, showed His mercy (Hosea 11:1): “The Lord has broken the rod of the wicked, the scepter of the rulers...All the lands are at rest and at peace; they break into singing” (Isaiah 14:5-7). God also broke Pharaoh, king of Egypt (Ezekiel 30:21-23), Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon (Daniel 4:32-33); and Sennacherib, king of Assyria (2 Chronicles 32:21). God is faithful, His grace, inexhaustible and His power, unstoppable.

God promised His people liberation, protection and victory over the adversary: “When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers, they won’t sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you won’t be burned; the flames won’t set you ablaze” (Isaiah 43:2).

The church is the people of God, “the pillar and foundation of the truth” (1 Timothy 3:15). So, the enemy has no power over her; Jesus guaranteed that “... I will build my church, and the gates of Hades won’t overcome it” (Matthew 16:18).

2. God delivers the righteous from all danger.

“Enoch walked faithfully with God; then he was no more, because God took him away” (Genesis 5:24); God saved Noah from the flood (Genesis 6:18); Lot was saved from death (2 Peter 2:7); God told Moses in time of affliction: “My Presence will go with you, and I will give you rest” (Exodus 33:14-15); David was freed from the envy and hatred of Saul (1 Samuel 23:10-14); Daniel and his friends were saved from death (Daniel 3:27, 6:22). Paul declared the following: “...If God is for us, who can be against us?” (Romans 8:31).

The unjust or impious people have often held power in their hands and oppressed the righteous by not acting fairly, lacking grace and love. But the righteous have the promise of being heard when they cry out to God, and they know that they will be delivered from their afflictions (Psalm 34:17-19). Paul affirmed that those who love God have the promise of being more than conquerors through him who loved us, Jesus Christ (Romans 8:28,37).

B. Guard the righteous from temptation (v. 3b)

Lest “the righteous use their hands to do evil” (v. 3b), God has promised security, protection, provision and blessing. But he also knows that when the tyrant and corrupt government of the wicked is prolonged, the pious are tempted to sin through doubting, being frustrated or rebellious, breaking God’s law and talking back to the Lord. When Midian oppressed Israel for seven years, God left them in misery.

Gideon was threshing the wheat to hide it from the Midianites when the angel appeared to him and said: “The Lord is with you, mighty warrior” (Judges 6:12). Given the circumstances, Gideon was tempted to doubt God. He replied: “Pardon me, my lord...but if the Lord is with us, why has all this happened to us? Where are all His wonders that our ancestors told us about when they said, ‘Did not the Lord bring us up out of Egypt?’ But now the Lord has abandoned us and given us into the hand of Midian” (Judges 6:13). As we see later on, God kept, strengthened and commissioned this man for the liberation of His people (Judges 6:1-14).

On the other hand, Israel was tempted by idolatry and mixed marriages, and many times, they yielded. God lamented about this, and expressed this through the prophet Jeremiah, when he said: "Yet my people have forgotten me; they burn incense to worthless idols, which made them stumble in their ways, in the ancient paths. They made them walk in byways, on roads not built up" (Jeremiah 18:15).

Jesus said: "apart from me you can do nothing" (John 15:5). So, the righteous need to live in intimate communion with God to stand firm when facing trials and ask to be strengthened like Abraham (Genesis 22:12), and victorious before temptation like Joseph (Genesis 39:21,23, 50:20), have integrity like Job (Job 42:10) and triumphant as Jesus was (Matthew 4:10-11). God has promised to keep the righteous. "... God is faithful; he won't let you be tempted beyond what you can bear" (1 Corinthians 10:13); He won't let the righteous fall forever but will sustain and help them (Psalm 55:22).

Prolonged pain by the tyranny of the wicked may cause the righteous to become complicit in their unjust actions to avoid problems, such as marginalization, isolation, indifference, dismissal from work, contempt, harassment, deprivation of opportunities. To this is added the internal struggle with discouragement, fatigue, irritability and shyness caused by pressure. The prophet Jeremiah faced this situation, and God promised him his protection: "they will fight against you but won't overcome you, for I am with you to rescue and save you" (Jeremiah 15:20).

The psalmist didn't ignore this reality that people who walk with God might face; Psalm 73 describes it well. However, deep trust in God and the recognition of His goodness and power is a valuable help to face these difficult situations in the church, the workplace, the family, among others. We can say together with King David: "When I am afraid, I put my trust in you" (Psalm 56:3).

Questions:

- Read and meditate on the following verses: Exodus 3:8, Deuteronomy 26:8; Ezekiel 20:21-23; Daniel 4:32-33; 2 Chronicles 32:21; and then mention how God works.
- Do you remember any difficult situation in which you have found yourself? Share how God delivered you.

III. God fills the righteous with good things (Psalm 125:4-5)

A. The prayer of the righteous (v. 4)

"Lord, do good to those who are good, to those who are upright in heart" (v. 4). In God's covenant with Israel, the principle of blessing was for those who walk in communion with Him and obey His commandments (Deuteronomy 28:1). The psalmist asked God to bless

those who are righteous as he had promised. The prophet Isaiah expressed the same idea: "Tell the righteous it will be well with them, for they will enjoy the fruit of their deeds" (Isaiah 3:10). The psalmist exclaimed: "Light shines on the righteous and joy on the upright in heart" (Psalm 97:11).

What is the greatest good that we can receive? It's salvation, "Immanuel" which means God with us (Matthew 1:23) and in us. Jesus said: "apart from me you can do nothing" (John 15:5). Paul affirmed that: "When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory" (Colossians 3:4). It's the presence of Christ that makes us good and upright and enables us to have good attitudes and actions.

B. The fate of those who abandon the straight path (v.5)

The psalmist said that those who abandon the duty to honor God will have condemnation. The prophet Isaiah expressed this lament: "But those who turn to crooked ways the Lord will banish with the evildoers" (v. 5). Isaiah 3:11 says: "Woe to the wicked! Disaster is upon them! They will be paid back for what their hands have done."

Those who depart from the path of God after having received the light, having enjoyed the heavenly gift and the good Word of God, having participated in the promises and the Holy Spirit, only experience disappointment, confusion and misfortune (Hebrews 6:4-6). The psalmist concluded with an invocation: "Peace be on Israel." Delitzsch, affirms the following: "Peace is the end of tyranny, of hostility, of division, of restlessness, of alarm; peace is freedom, harmony, security and blessing" (Mathew, Henry. Poetic Books, Psalms, volume I. Spain: Editorial CLIE, 1983, p.450).

Christ is our peace. He has put an end to the tyranny of sin, because when we were weak, he met us; when we were sinners, he died for us; when we were in enmity with Him, he reconciled us to Himself and saved us from His wrath (Romans 5:6-10). He has given us freedom, security and communion, and has promised to be with us until the end. Our trust must be placed in Him.

Questions:

- How many benefits have you received through prayer? Mention some of them.
- Name some of the consequences that come to those who abandon the way of the Lord.

Conclusion

Psalm 125 teaches us that God is Almighty; and the wonderful thing is that He uses His power to constantly protect us, because He loves us with eternal love (Jeremiah 31:3). God dwells in our hearts, and also gives us His protection. We need to renew our trust in Him and reaffirm together with the psalmist that: "Those who trust in the Lord are like Mount Zion..." (Psalm 125:1a).



Praise And Worship God

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Passage to Study: Psalm 149, 150

Memory Verse: “Praise the Lord. Sing to the Lord a new song, his praise in the assembly of his faithful people” Psalm 149:1.

Lesson Aim: To apply the psalmist’s principles of praise today.

Introduction

Remember that the psalms are poetry, and as such, contain symbolic and metaphorical language. Also, these are words addressed to God. In them, praise, human faith, depression, doubts, despair are expressed. They provide us with a rich language about how to address God.

Psalm 149 and Psalm 150 are part of the group of four psalms (146-150) located at the end of the book. They all begin and end in the same way with: ‘Hallelujah’, which means ‘Praise the Lord!’. This group of psalms forms an elaborate doxology for the book, and its main theme is praise to God. They are psalms for liturgical use, to be sung in the weekly religious celebrations.

This way of beginning and ending the psalms we study gives us the idea of the festive tone they propose when they are sung. In addition to exalting God, these texts provide specific reasons to praise. They suggest ways of expressing worship to God, the use of musical instruments, and talk about the places where we praise God.

As a curious fact, we note that dance is introduced only in these psalms as an expression of praise. There is no reliable information on the style of the dances accepted in the sanctuary at the time these psalms were written, but there is information that the use of dance in different circumstances was common at the time.

These two psalms point to praise as part of the traditional weekly celebration in the religious life of the time. Thus, in Psalm 149:1 we read: “in the assembly of his faithful people” and in Psalm 150:1 we read: “Praise God in His sanctuary”. These expressions point to community praise. Also, both verses mention some of the reasons for praising God, as well as referring to other aspects of praise. While in Psalm 149, praise is encouraged everywhere with joy and expressions of joy, Psalm 150 deals more with the musical instruments that were used at that time.

It’s important to remember that each psalm is a literary unit. So, we shouldn’t take a verse and try to interpret it without considering the entire unit. Also, most of the psalms originated in the context of Israel’s worship.

I. Praise God all his people (Psalm 149)

Psalm 149 calls first for praise to take place in the congregation of saints, and for this praise to be a new song (v.1). Interestingly, as we have already mentioned, this is a liturgical psalm, to be sung in religious celebrations. We assume, then, that it was sung many times. So, what does ‘new’ mean? (v.1a)? Although it may refer to new songs, here, the use seems to propose expressions of new, fresh feelings and emotions.

The second part of Psalm 149:1 says: “... his praise in the assembly of his faithful people.” We understand that the center of praise is God, and the expression ‘his praise’ indicates that the focus of the celebration is on God himself. Also, the psalmist said that praise needs to be in the assembly of the faithful. Here we can note that there is talk of a congregation, that is to say that the reference is to a group of people who worship together. Wilfredo Canales Farfán said: “When our worship isn’t centered on God, our tastes, our comfort, our interests take precedence” (unpublished article: “Contemporary worship and church”).

There are a number of subtle ways to alter the focus of praise and worship in our services. When this activity ceases to be a pastoral task and becomes an exhibition of musical talent, then praise ceases to be a part of the dialogue between God and His congregation, and becomes the center of the celebration. On other occasions, it’s possible that praise is transformed into a mini concert where there are actors and spectators, distracting the character of community worship.

Visiting congregations of different denominations, we have frequently observed that the compositions have an accentuated emphasis on 'me', distorting the purpose of the praise that must necessarily express our appreciation and admiration for our God, exalting His nature and His work.

Secondly, the feeling and emotion that this Psalm 149 conveys is joy and security that trust in Almighty God gives us. The expression of joy, victory and peace arises naturally from the experiences of the week. There is no tension, there is freedom. Praise in this psalm identifies a militant congregation that faithfully obeys God's will. Likewise, the fact that in this psalm praise is linked to vengeance and judgment is totally unusual. Scholars have given different ideas on this subject, although they don't agree. What they do agree with is that the psalmist identified God's enemies as his personal enemies. Probably, this combination of themes refers to militant praise, to the fact that praise must also be action. As emotional beings, we need to 'feel' the presence of God. However, what confirms our relationship with God is how we act day by day.

One of the modules that the Nazarene Publishing House has produced on biblical interpretation says, that in the case of Psalms like the 149th: "Expressions of hate and cursing presuppose the theological conviction that God is finally the fair judge and that He will execute His punishment on enemies. As Christians we must look at these psalms through the commandment of love. The gospel calls us to love our enemies, pray for them, etc., and this should guide the interpretation of these psalms" (Vail, Michael W., editor. *Teachers' Guide to Biblical interpretation*, 2004, p. 11).

Questions:

- In what sense should praise be a new song?
- What happens when praise isn't focused on God?

II. Praise God for what He is and does (Psalm 150:1-2)

The psalmist here highlights three aspects of God, and therefore encouraged the recipient to praise God. He did this with three phrases full of emotion: "praise him in the magnificence of his firmament. Praise him for his exploits; praise him according to the crowd of his greatness" (vv. 1-2). It's impossible to read this final part of the doxology softly. It communicates strong feelings of joy, gratitude and devotion. We should add some signs of admiration to be able to capture the growing rejoicing that the poet tried to communicate.

Adam Clarke suggests that the Hebrew word that the psalmist used here is *rakia*, which means "the immense expansion that surrounds the Earth" (*Commentary on the Holy Bible*, volume III. USA: NPH, 1974, p.129). It's fair to say that this expression includes everything that exists in the entire universe, something that was anticipated Psalm 19:1 where we read: "The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands."

Psalm 150 encourages us to praise God for what He has done, for what He continues to do, and for what He is. In the original context, the Jewish people celebrated their own history with these expressions. They remembered what God had done for generations, forming and favoring His people to carry out the mission entrusted to them, that of being a blessing to all the families of the earth (Genesis 12:3).

We, who are part of the great family of God, celebrate what He does for us, and what it means for each one and for the people of which we're a part. Therefore, let's avoid having an individualistic outlook, singing and celebrating personal gain. Praise needs to be in the first-person plural – 'we' and 'us' – rather than focusing on ourselves. As disciples of Christ, we have been invited, forgiven and restored so that the world might know the truth that sets us free (John 8:32). The emphasis must be on the people of God, because as a congregation, we're the body of Christ, and at the same time, a human group. In our unity, we praise and serve God. We're also a missionary people. We need to read Psalm 150 in light of the task entrusted to us (Matthew 28:18-20), since everything we receive and enjoy from God is linked to the mission of sharing the gospel with everyone, all the time.

Questions:

- Just as the Jewish people celebrated their history, what do we celebrate?

III. Praise God with every instrument (Psalm 150:3-5)

In this section, instead of commenting on musical instruments, let's talk about music, remembering that praise generally refers to the chanted expression of worship. We don't know when people began to develop music, but we find that different people have different theories, some very interesting. Carlos Rosas, liturgical composer and Director of a church choir in San Antonio, Texas, wrote an article "Music at the service of the Kingdom". He quotes Miguel León Portillo: "All Aztec cities began their life with music." For Rosas, music in general unites people, transmits social values, denounces injustices and influences human behavior.

Of these characteristics, Rosas takes two and applies them to liturgical music:

a) Music unites believers; All worship is directed to God and is a celebration of the entire congregation. All people come together to sing to God with the accompaniment of music;

b) Music transmits evangelical values. Jesus is present in praise when values such as 'sharing', 'living in community' and 'serving' are enacted.

Rosas says: "If music doesn't fulfill these functions, it becomes just like a 'lullaby' that calms and numbs" (published in: Journal notes, year 6, N. 1, USA:1986, p.3 & 9). It reminds us that Christians live in a struggle for values. Music, therefore, should be an invitation to action. In Psalms 149 and 150, we're encouraged to join in praising God as a congregation in the sanctuary, using all the instruments of the temple orchestra.

There are three types of instruments mentioned in Psalm 150: wind, string and percussion. Those of wind mentioned were: the horn or *shophar*, also called ram's horn in Joshua 6:4. This was an instrument used to give signals and not to play melodies. It's still used today in Judaism. They used flutes or *ugab* (some versions translate this name as an organ). According to the *Beacon Bible Commentary*, it was probably a type of bagpipe that was grouped into a type of band.

The string instruments were next. The psaltery or *nebel*, which was a type of harp, although a physical description of it's not clearly known; the harp or *kinnor*, a small instrument with 8 or 10 strings made of lamb gut, probably the one David used to comfort King Saul.

The percussion instruments were the following: tambourines, which may well resemble the current tambourine, although some authors suggest that it may have had two membranes to achieve sound. This instrument appears in Assyrian and Egyptian monuments. They used cymbals or *meziltayim* or *tziltazal*, which was similar to modern ones, played by clashing them against each other (Purkiser, W. T. *Beacon Bible Commentary*, volume III USA: NPH, 1984, p. 456). The instruments mentioned in this psalm are those that made up the orchestra of the temple. There were other musical instruments used in public festivities and private celebrations that weren't allowed in the temple.

According to the book *Daily Life in Biblical Times*, we read the following: "The formal worship of the Israelites observed several rites prescribed by God. Music served as an accompaniment to these rites ... The songs and musicians could only come from the males of certain families. Similarly, the types of instruments were restricted" (Packer, James I. Merrill C. Tenney and William White. *Daily life in biblical times*. USA: Editorial Vida, 1985, p.154).

There are some ideas that arise from this information. First, the music at the service pointed to the theme of the celebration. Secondly, music accompanied the congregation in celebration, which means that it wasn't the main thing. Third, the instruments used were accepted as long as they contributed to the development of temple celebrations. And lastly, the musicians were carefully selected.

The forms of the ancient services have been looked at and some things are imitated, such as the use of *shophar*, in some cases, and even the dancing has become popular in worship services. However these don't often add importance to the main objective, that of praising God. Often, not much attention is paid attention to the principles mentioned above

Considering the distance in time and culture, the imitation of typical forms of Hebrew culture is probably not the most appropriate. However, the principles of uniting and transmitting values are important because they transcend the distance of time and culture.

The Church of the Nazarene around the world is old enough to reflect, give opinions and decide on the forms of praise that best participate in the dialogue between the people and God in celebrating the weekly service. Our cultures are spiced with many contributions, as well as the particular way of understanding the Scriptures of the Nazarene people. Our cultural identities modify the form of the liturgy, the duration of the celebrations, the musical instruments we use, the tunes and the rhythms that are most expressive to us, including our physical posture, among other aspects. We experience moments of recollection, amazement, reverence and at the same time respectful fear, which is mixed with the natural joy that arises from a lively and dynamic relationship with our God.

Questions:

- List three instruments that were used in the temple orchestra at the time that Psalm 150 was written.
- What is the role of music in public worship?

Conclusion

These last two 'alleluia,' psalms bridge the praise in the time of the psalmist and the principles for today. Likewise, our doctrinal identity is manifested in the content of praise, song lyrics, prayer, preaching and offerings. Our worship and praise is the vehicle that characterizes and expresses the truths we believe. It's not about imitating ritual expressions, or following fashions on-line. We need to worship by reflecting on the words we sing, expressing communally our praise to God.

Characteristics of God's People

Second Quarter

God's People are a Compassionate People
God's People are Called to Train Others
God's People are Witnesses
God's People Share a Social Heritage
God's People and Civil Governments
God's People and the Family
God's People Defend Life
God's People Care About Children
God's People Serve
God's People are Christians
God's People are a Holy People
God's People are a Missional People
God's People Share the Good News



God's People are Compassionate People

Marco Rocha (Argentina)

Passage to Study: Matthew 9:36, 14:14-21, 25:34-45; John 14:12, 15:13

Memory Verse: "When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd" Matthew 9:36.

Lesson Aim: To understand that Jesus commands us to show compassion and to live it and apply it every day in whatever context we find ourselves.

Introduction

Begin the class by asking students to cite examples or share testimonies of compassionate actions that could occur in different areas of life such as school, work, and church. Then, based on the examples mentioned, develop a definition of compassion with students, and write it on the board. Conclude the activity by explaining that while we understand compassion to be that feeling of identification or empathy with the suffering of our neighbors and the search for actions we can carry out to alleviate or eliminate their suffering, we can get a more complete understanding of the meaning of this word through the Scriptures, especially, through the life and teachings of Jesus Christ.

Christian compassion is presented as a command from God that, when propelled by His love, believers are led to carry out actions of solidarity in favor of those who suffer. Unlike those carried out by philanthropic groups and nongovernmental organizations dedicated to humanitarian aid, Christian compassionate actions result from the work of God in our lives, and they are expressed, not only as concrete actions of love for our neighbors, but as a lifestyle. In this lesson, compassion will be addressed from a biblical perspective, taking as a reference the teachings, life, and work of our Lord Jesus Christ.

I. Compassion is a mandate

The Bible clearly indicates that it's not possible to serve God while ignoring the needs of others. This is a demand that the Lord makes to His people, and which was recorded in different passages of the law that he gave to Israel. For example, in Deuteronomy 24:20-21, God said: "When you beat the olives from your trees, don't go over the branches a second time. Leave what remains for the foreigner, the fatherless and the widow. When you harvest the grapes in your vineyard, don't go over the vines again. Leave what remains for the foreigner, the fatherless and the widow."

The Lord demands compassion from His people because He's a compassionate God. His concern for the care of the orphan, the widow, and the stranger is presented over and over again in the same law (Exodus 22:22-27; Deuteronomy 10:18, 26:12-13); and in other passages of the Old Testament (Psalm 68:5-6; Isaiah 1:16-18). In this way, it's possible to notice through the Scriptures that God seeks that His compassionate character is also imprinted on the character of His people.

It's in Jesus that this demand for compassion can be seen in His life and teaching. He considered people in an holistic way: preaching, teaching, healing all diseases and all ailments in the people (Matthew 4:23). Jesus saw people's needs and placed great emphasis on the importance of considering compassion as a response to the great divine mandate: "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'" (Matthew 22:37-39). In this way, Jesus is the foundations for Christian compassion in which our social responsibility is part of our relationship with God, taking special care of those who suffer the most.

Therefore, we need to recognize that compassion isn't an option for Christians, but it's one of God's mandates, seen in Christ and taught by Him. Every disciple needs to show compassion with joy and in holy obedience. So, as Richard Taylor puts it: "Jesus is the personification of the Creator's compassion, and through that personification He teaches His followers that compassion characterizes the Christian way of living" (Beacon Theological Dictionary. USA: CNP, 1984, p.134).

The compassionate life, as a response to the command of Jesus, is a life driven by love that is evidenced in interested actions that seek to make it a priority to love our neighbors. Christian love makes it possible for believers to share what they have with the poor, the handicapped, the lame, and the blind (Luke 14:13), without expecting anything in return. This is the bond that unites us in Christian love. It creates happy homes, unites husbands and wives, stabilizes families, plants churches, builds peace-loving governments, evangelizes those who haven't heard about Jesus, and pours out life to all men" (Purkiser, WT Exploring our Christian faith. USA: CNP, 1988, p.605). Christian love, expressed in compassion, expects nothing in return, which is a value contrary to that which prevails in many of our current societies.

However, we receive our reward from Christ himself because He sees us as we serve with joy and fullness those who are invisible in a marginalized world (Matthew 25:34-45). Serving those who suffer is, in some way, continuing the ministry that Jesus inaugurated, responding to His mandate with the capacities and gifts that He has given us through the Holy Spirit.

Questions:

- Why do we affirm that compassion isn't an option for the Christian?
- What is Christian compassion; and how is it different from philanthropy?

II. Compassion is love in action

Jesus' compassion was reflected in concrete compassionate actions. Matthew 14:14 states: "When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them and healed their sick." On that occasion, the Lord Jesus was looking for some rest and time alone with His father in the remote and uninhabited region on the eastern coast of the Sea of Galilee. But the crowd found out that the Master was there, and decided to follow him on foot, circling the north end of the sea. When Jesus got out of the boat, he found a large crowd waiting for him. Instead of getting angry, he had compassion on them and healed those who were sick. Jesus' compassionate character is clearly reflected in the healings performed on the shores of the Sea of Galilee. He postponed his personal interests, which were valid, since they responded to His need to be alone to pray and rest.

However, the Lord stopped His schedule, and He healed the sick who were in the group that was waiting for Him near the sea. This compassionate action of Jesus, prompted by love, happened again at dusk, when

he fed the crowd (Matthew 14:15-21). This second compassionate action was accompanied by a challenge and chance to teach His disciples. They obeyed Jesus' command even though they only saw a boy with a small snack in a basket. The lesson for every believer is this: No matter how impossible the task seems that has been assigned to us, with divine help, it can be done because there is nothing impossible for God (Luke 1:37) (Nielson, John B. Beacon Bible Commentary, volume 6. USA: CNP, 1965, p. 148).

Compassionate actions must be accompanied by faith, and the conviction that God himself is the one who is with us, empowering us and investing us with power to carry out the task. The world needs disciples of Christ full of faith and hope who are fearlessly willing to act as salt and light through their compassionate actions, prioritizing the condition of others, and seeking to alleviate their suffering, driven by the love of God.

There is a need for believers who are moved deeply within themselves in the face of human pain, and are sensitive to the call of Christ to carry out actions that seek to do everything in their power to change that reality. On many occasions, we may feel that we don't have all the resources we would like to have to act compassionately, and it's here where faith becomes more evident. Remember the feeding of the 5,000 was done with only five loaves and two fish (Matthew 14:19).

Today, the Lord is still looking for disciples willing to act by faith with hearts committed to God and their neighbors, whose compassionate actions are also actions of faith, and who pursue opportunities to bring glory to God. Purkiser says: "The virtue that crowns the Christian life involves more than the rendering of a service; it demands the sacrifice of self. Service requires the non-selfish application of time, talents, strength, and substance to achieve the good of others. Sacrifice, in its supreme manifestation, occurs when a man offers his life for his friends"(John 15:13). (Purkiser, W. T. Exploring our Christian faith. USA: CNP, 1988, p.608).

The teachings of Christ can be incarnated in us when we help our neighbors and get involved in such a way that we can serve Him with love and joy.

Questions:

- How did Jesus express his compassionate character?
- Mention the qualities that a compassionate believer must have today to be like Jesus.

III. Compassion is a way of life

The church today seeks to carry out compassionate actions in different ways. As Christian communities, we have ministries dedicated to planning and organizing these actions to impact the society we minister to.

Through compassionate ministries, congregations can become involved in caring for the most vulnerable sectors of society, working in a coordinated way to be able to alleviate some of the complicated problems of our societies. However, it's important to warn of the danger to congregations of limiting Christian compassion to these ministries and good works. Compassion, as discussed in the previous points, is much more than that. It's a lifestyle. Compassionate acts are the result of communion with God, the commitment of Christian love and the disposition to act in faith with the conviction that we're working for the Lord. A lifestyle that evidences the fruit of the Holy Spirit's unfailingly compassionate way of life, which is supported by the Scriptures (see the passages quoted in the previous points).

On the other hand, if compassionate actions are the cause of our Christian commitment, and not the fruit or result, then we run the risk of ceasing to be a church and becoming a philanthropic or humanitarian aid organization. So, we need to be clear that compassion is much more than the compassionate actions of the believers. Compassion reflects that Christ lives in our lives and leads us to do the things that He did, and even greater things (John 14:12).

Another aspect to consider when living a compassionate lifestyle is the immediate context in which the believer must move and put compassion into action. In today's world, there are different social demands that require the believer to decide to get involved or not with compassionate actions. These vary according to culture and type of society.

However, many of them contain ethical dilemmas that are challenging for believers. For this reason, it's important that those who want to get involved working with the needs that these contemporary social demands pose, bear in mind that compassionate actions must be understood within the framework of the actions of the holy life and which should mainly seek "the honor of Christ, the well-being of the church and the home, the inviolable character of human life and personality, and the eternal salvation of souls. These would be fixed points that will help us to be oriented and determine the direction to follow" (Taylor, Richard. *Exploring Christian Holiness: The Theological Foundations*, Volume 3. USA: CNP, 1999, p. 216).

On the other hand, in addition to these social demands of society, opportunities will arise around us where we can act with compassion. Environments in which we operate daily such as home, work and school, usually offer spaces for the light of Christ to shine with actions of compassion and mercy. Therefore, in addition to the believer's involvement in compassionate ministries carried out by the congregation, or in social actions carried out as members of a community, it will be in the sphere of daily life where we will be able to put into practice more quickly Christ's compassionate character reflected in Matthew 9:36 where we read: "When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd."

Hence, the challenge for the believer is to see the crowds holistically, as Jesus did, with their spiritual and physical deficiencies, and act accordingly, even when this leads us to sacrifice our own comfort or well-being. The love for those who suffer will make us commit ourselves to helping people we would never have thought of caring for, and to serve the weakest and most underprivileged sectors in places that, perhaps, we would never have visited were it not for having decided to allow the compassionate character of Christ to be increasingly formed in us.

Questions:

- What does it mean to have a compassionate lifestyle?
- Share three ways you can show compassion where you live.

Conclusion

People often have different perceptions about the meaning of compassion, mistaking it even for philanthropy. But believers have a clear description of its meaning and the way to carry it out in the Scriptures, especially through the teachings and work of Jesus Christ. So, for the church, compassion isn't an option, but the response to a divine mandate that is made evident in a lifestyle that reflects the holy character of Jesus as we act selflessly for those in need amid great social challenges. Acting with compassion in all spheres of our lives implies seeing people as Christ sees them, and taking steps to change their reality.



God's People are Called to Train Others

Jorge L. Julca (Argentina)

Passage to Study: Deuteronomy 6:4-9; Matthew 28:18-20; 2 Corinthians 3:18; Ephesians 4:12-16

Memory Verse: "...to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up" Ephesians 4:12.

Lesson Aim: To understand the importance of education in the church as an instrument for the fulfillment of God's mission.

Introduction

When we think about the role that education plays among the members of the church, various questions arise from our reflection: What makes Christian education different? What is our educational task based on? And what is the purpose of the formation of God's people?

These are key questions for our lesson today. The first is related to the nature of Christian education; the second, with its foundation; and the third, with its reason for existing, that is, with its purpose.

I. The nature of Christian education: a formative process of God's people (Ephesians 4:12-16)

When we study the educational role of the church, some of the first questions that arise are these: What is distinctive about the task of Christian education? And how is this different from other educational efforts?

In general, secular educational proposals make us see the educational process basically as a pre-work training process, with clearly defined objectives that must be achieved in a previously established period of time. That is a rather pragmatic and mechanistic approach to the educational act. However, according to the Scriptures, Christian education is a process that is distinguished from any other for several fundamental reasons:

- A. It's a process that focuses on the integral formation of the person, and not merely on the intellectual area. The whole person is included (Luke 2:52).
- B. The student isn't a depersonalized object that intervenes in the educational process, but a subject that actively participates in it. Biblically, we assume that we have been created in God's Image (Imago Dei) (Genesis 1:27), and as such, we have in ourselves the ability to reflect, learn and understand as thinking beings. The very creative design of God has endowed us with the dignity and respect that every human person should have.

- C. The training period isn't a stage in the person's life that ends. It's a process in continuous development, of readiness for the challenges of the Christian life, and in the search for fullness in Christ (Ephesians 4:13,15).

Questions:

- What is the goal of Christian education?
- Please complete the following comparison chart .

Christian Education	Other Types of Education

II. The Word of God is the foundation for Christian education (Deuteronomy 6:4-9; Acts 2:42; 2 Corinthians 3:18)

The Scriptures show us that God is, fundamentally, the great Teacher who is deeply interested in forming His people. He has made himself known and, as a sign of His supreme desire to identify himself with His creation, He has incarnated himself in the person of Jesus Christ (Galatians 4:4; Hebrews 1:1-2). In fact, we couldn't know Him if He had not revealed Himself to us. God's pedagogical intention is a common thread that runs throughout the Scriptures.

A. In the Pentateuch

In the first five books of the Bible, by means of the commandments and the different laws, God was forming His people, giving them the norms that they needed to live righteously before Him, and for a better administration of their own lives, their relationships, and their resources.

In the specific context of the Old Testament and the rise of God's people, instruction on divine law was based on the role of the Hebrew family in the generational transmission of faith. In the educational model designed by God himself, the role of the Hebrew father was decisive for the education of his children. That responsibility was based on the transmission of the *Shema*, which is the most important prayer in Judaism (Deuteronomy 6:4-9).

There are several central teachings in the *Shema* that are extremely important to keep in mind as we carry out our formative task as a church today. These teachings are mentioned below.

1. The role of the family is decisive for formation of the new generations. God gave parents the privilege and responsibility not only of conception, but above all, the task of giving their children a spiritual legacy.
2. The fundamental teaching for life is linked to the theological affirmation of the existence of a single God whom we must love as a priority in life. In the New Testament, Jesus also referred to this teaching as the great commandment (Matthew 22:34-40), giving evidence that this supreme commandment had been taught to him in his own home.
3. The key starting point for the generational transmission of the great commandment lies, first, in the appropriation of this eternal truth in the hearts of the parents (Deuteronomy 6:5-6).
4. The didactic methodology for the delivery of this spiritual heritage is related to taking advantage of all places (at home or on the road) and all the time (when getting up and going to bed) as spaces for permanent learning (Deuteronomy 6:7).
5. The emphasis of teaching in the Hebrew family wasn't on oral transmission, or on the simple mechanistic and rote repetition of some theological statements or dogmas, but rather, in the desire to mold with the divine commandments and principles all family life. This gives the *Shema* its formative character.

In other words, according to the Scriptures, the formation of the people of God begins systematically within the family, and is transmitted from generation to generation. That has been the secret of the survival of the people of God through the centuries, and it's certainly good advice for the church today.

B. In the historical and prophetic books

The historical books diligently keep the record of the life of the people of God who, on the one hand, connected it with their inheritance and the saving acts of God through their lives, but, on the other, was a permanent reminder of the need to live grateful to the Lord for His favor, mighty works, and mercies. These books are full of wonderful stories that show us the character, faithfulness, love, forgiveness, power, and mercy of God. Such stories inspire life and strengthen faith by remembering the wonderful historical events of God in the accompaniment of his people. Milestones of God's action in the past become a brand, the identity of His people. In the prophetic literature, God Himself, through His direct spokesmen, the prophets, spoke to concrete situations in the life of

the people of Israel in order to offer them instruction, warning, judgment and mercy. The prophetic message is marked by two dimensions: denunciation of sin and the invitation to repentance and turning to God. In the midst of disobedience, infidelity, and rebellion, the Lord, through this literature, was also working to bring reconciliation to his people.

C. In the Gospels

When we study the New Testament, it's essential to recognize that the supreme sign of God's teaching intention was given in the incarnation of Jesus Christ. Through this event, Jesus, the Son of God, identified with the human race, showing Himself and sharing not only His teachings, but His own life. The Lord said it: "...He who has seen me has seen the Father..." (John 14:9). The Master didn't teach His disciples by imparting a lot of knowledge to them, but by sharing His life. In Jesus' time, there were no spiritual teachers or rabbis who shared their very life with their followers.

Costas, quoting John Stam, wrote: "Following Jesus could only be done at his invitation, whereas with the rabbis one requested it. Becoming a disciple of Jesus involved practical training that encompassed everyone's way of life. With the rabbis it was simply an intellectual formation. Jesus' invitation to follow him was based on a personal relationship; that of the rabbis was basically doctrinal" (Costas, Orlando. *Compromiso y Misión*. USA: Editorial Caribe, 1979, p. 47).

Martha Saint de Berberían, in her book *Cuatro Milenios de Educación Religiosa* (in English: *Four Millennia of Religious Education*), recognized this virtue in the ministry of Jesus, when she wrote: "The capacity of Jesus as Teacher is reflected in a particular way in his relationship with the disciples... With them He developed a type of work similar to that of a biblical institute but without classrooms or schedules. He also had no defined or systematized curriculum. It was an education or preparation through being in His company, living with Jesus Christ, seeing Him act, and going out and putting into practice what they learned during those three years" (*Cuatro Milenios de Educación Religiosa*. Guatemala: Ediciones SA-VER, 1983, p. 16).

D. In the Book of Acts

The early church had teaching as one of its main ministries. The passage in Acts 2:42, referring to this dynamic in the life of the early Christians, says: "And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching..." That teaching didn't refer to the instruction of a doctrinal body required to become a member of the church, but to the oral transmission of the basic teachings of Jesus.

From its earliest days, the Lord's church recognized that the key to their identity and the preservation of their heritage was in the formation of disciples. It's very common to read in the book of Acts the integration of preaching and teaching in the church planting strategy in the first century world.

E. In the Epistles

The epistolary literature is a clear example of the continuation of God's educational action on His nascent church in the context of the first century. In no case were the epistles written for no apparent reason. They all carry a purpose of instruction to the first Christian communities that were struggling under the influence of false teachers, the need to consolidate new believers in the faith, face the insinuations of the Judaizers, Roman persecutions, among others threats.

Especially in Pauline literature, the importance of the formation of the believer is always present. For Paul, God's demand for the Christian's life was to perfect himself to the measure of Jesus Christ (Ephesians 4:11-16; Philippians 1:6; Colossians 1:28-29).

The affirmation of 2 Corinthians 3:18 brings to mind at least three central ideas regarding our lesson:

1. First of all, walking with Christ is a process, a training that lasts a lifetime (we're being transformed).
2. The Holy Spirit is the one who acts in the midst of this process, transforming them ("which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.")
3. Thirdly, in this process, all believers ("all of us") are immersed.

In general, the New Testament guidelines gives evidence of the pedagogical intention of the apostles to integrally form the new believers in that new relationship with the Creator that they had started by confessing and accepting Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. That teaching purpose of God is in complete harmony with His call to live in holiness, which includes the person's whole life.

In relation to this point, God's teaching intention throughout the history of salvation, the formation of his people in different forms and methods, and especially, culminating in the incarnation of Jesus Christ, legitimizes the importance of the teaching ministry in the church. We're a people called to train new believers according to the Word of God.

Questions:

- Do you consider that there is a link between the family and the formation of the believer? Comment.
- What role does Scripture play in the formation of God's people?

III. The purpose of Christian formation in fulfilling the mission of God (Matthew 28:18-20)

The formative task is a priority task for the church, because as a depositary of the faith, she's responsible for giving continuity to the proclamation of the Gospel message, to be faithful to the final charge of the Lord Jesus (Matthew 28:18-20). In the words of the Nazarene theologian Purkiser: "the task of the church is to summon all men to kneel before the sovereignty of Christ, to recognize him as Lord and King" (Exploring Our Christian Faith. USA: CNP, 1979, p. 444).

Faced with this inescapable responsibility, we find that the teaching task is closely linked to the supreme task of the church, and it becomes the ideal help for the fulfillment of the mission. Jesus' teaching model evidenced in the Gospels shows that close relationship between formation and mission. The Lord called His disciples. He lived with them, giving them the opportunity to have an active part in their training, and, finally, he sent them to continue to make disciples. Jesus' teaching task was training with purpose, and not only to satisfy the intellectual curiosity of his disciples.

In John 20:21, the Lord Jesus clearly expressed the dynamics of this formative process in the following terms: "As the Father sent me, so I also send you." In other words, for Jesus, the formation of His disciples only took place when it took the form of active service and the continuity of the proclamation of the kingdom of God and its demands.

It's possible to affirm that for both Jesus and the apostles, it became clear that ministerial formation wasn't an end in itself, but a means of reaching others with the Kingdom message.

Questions:

- How is God's mission related to the teaching of biblical precepts?
- How was the teaching task of the Lord Jesus different from the education provided by the religious leaders of that time?

Conclusion

All Scripture gives evidence of a teaching God who seeks to train His people to live in fullness of life. Since creation, He has revealed himself and made Himself known in multiple ways for that purpose. But in Jesus' incarnation, that divine purpose left us with the greatest lesson in history. The formation of the people of God is a task delegated to the church which we must understand as a process that seeks to integrate all areas of a person's life and accompany said believer throughout life. In other words, every disciple of Jesus will always be an apprentice who is permanently being formed in the image of Christ to fulfill God's mission in the world, and not only to satisfy his own expectations.



God's People are Witnesses

Sara Patetta (United States of America)

Passage to Study: John 9:35-41; Romans 10:13-15

Memory Verse: "For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it's the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes..." Romans 1:16.

Lesson Aim: To value the deep meaning that our testimony has for God and His church.

Introduction

In this lesson, we'll see why, when we believe and become a true followers of the Lord, we're expected to testify and proclaim the gospel to all people for the glory of God and the fulfillment of the Kingdom. The Lord Jesus Christ specifically made this command: "Go therefore, and make disciples of all nations ..." (Matthew 28:19); With respect to which he added: "... and you will be witnesses to me ..." (Acts 1:8).

In his letter to the Romans, the apostle Paul made a statement that should inspire and motivate the believer to join in this great task: "For there is no difference between Jew and Gentile—the same Lord is Lord of all and richly blesses all who call on him... How, then, can they call on the one they haven't believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they haven't heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? (Romans 10:12,14).

The task is to testify, to announce the Good News of salvation. With this purpose in mind, in another letter Paul clearly explained the method that the Lord chose to save humans, which involves all believers: "For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom didn't know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe" (1 Corinthians 1:21).

Indeed, if the gospel weren't "the power of God to salvation to everyone who believes" (Romans 1:16), witnessing to the power of the crucified Christ would simply sound insane. But the latter isn't so. The gospel, in essence, is 'the mystery hidden for long ages past, but now revealed and made known through the prophetic writings by the command of the eternal God, so that all the Gentiles might come to the obedience that comes from faith' (Romans 16:25b-26). That mystery that is to be revealed is the Good News about the life, death

and resurrection of Jesus Christ. We have access to God's forgiveness, receiving salvation through grace and faith. In this lesson we will study how to offer the Good News of salvation from a biblical perspective.

I. A people who share their testimony for the glory of God

Sharing our testimony for the glory of God must be the primary motivation. It's not about us but about the Lord. When we testify we shouldn't be like salespersons offering a better life or a place in heaven. Peoples' lives will change as they grow in maturity in their walk with the Lord. We need to share the wonderful news that God wants to forgive them and walk alongside them in their lives. Witnessing isn't about offering peace, joy, health or prosperity (although these things may follow). The message of salvation isn't about our carnal well-being, but about the eternal purpose of God (Ephesians 3:11).

So, it's of utmost importance that we analyze our motivation when we approach someone with the intention of witnessing to them. It's not a matter of convincing an atheist intellectually about the existence of God, or having heated discussions. When Philip found Nathanael, he told him that they had found the Christ announced by Scripture. Nathanael wanted to enter into arguments answering: "... Can something good come out of Nazareth? ..." (John 1:46). But, instead of entering into discussion, Phillip replied: "Come and see" (v. 46). Philip could have refuted: "Does not the prophet say that the Christ would be called a Nazarene?"; but that's not what happened. Philip simply said to Nathanael: "Come and see" (v. 46).

When we witness, our motivation shouldn't involve making promises of a quick remedy that will solve their lives by becoming Christians. Following Jesus isn't a magic formula for solving the problem of existence itself. Rather, people should be persuaded that they are sinners. They have sinned against God (Romans 3:23, 6:23a). However, we must be careful with the other extreme. Focusing only on the negative issues can make a person depressed. The wise and balanced thing is to teach that, in light of God's law, disobedience is sin, but the important thing is that Christ came to save the sinner (Luke 19:10).

We shouldn't offer the gospel as a remedy to get out of addictions and vices, such as uncontrollable anger or lying. Coming to God isn't like going to a 'treatment center'. However, we can't deny that all those aspects of a person's life in this world will be transformed as a result of true repentance and the decision to get to know the Lord and learning to obey His commandments. So, offering a promise of a better life as the benefit to the convert must be of secondary importance to the great motivation to glorify God by His grace and provision in Christ. Being Christians is about a relationship with Christ. By His grace, we're saved from sins to have fellowship with Him.

Questions:

- Who should testify, and why should we do it?
- What attitude should the believer avoid when witnessing? Explain.

II. People who testify biblically

The Bible tells us the pattern of a genuine conversion: "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!" (2 Corinthians 5:17). This truth is clearly exemplified in Onesimus, who was a slave to Philemon, a believer in the early Christian church. This slave, arrived in Rome, after having robbed his owner and also having escaped (acts punishable by the death penalty). He met Paul, who wrote to Philemon telling him that Onesimus had become a Christian in prison. The letter states that Onesimus had been sincerely converted, and wanted to make good for his crimes (Philemon 10-11).

God changed Onesimus from being a useless slave to a useful person, according to His plan. Onesimus' repentance and conversion implied a real change of heart, which was transforming him into being a useful individual, not only for his owner; but mainly, he was going to be useful to God for the extension of his Kingdom, through his testimony. This is characteristic of a truly transformed person who becomes a better worshiper, a better employee, a better wife, mother, son, etc.

The Lord's promise is as follows: "As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and don't return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It won't return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it" (Isaiah 55:10-11).

The Word of God is like a seed that the Lord provides for those of us who share the gospel, and Jesus promises to germinate and produce the harvest. The Bible is transformed into the Bread of Life for all those who receive it and obey it according to His will. In John 1:45, Philip used Scripture when he spoke to Nathanael about the Messiah: "We have found the one Moses wrote about in the Law, and about whom the prophets also wrote—Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph."

This helps us see that it's good to use Scripture when witnessing to a person, because this is what the Holy Spirit uses to convince the listener of sin. Romans 10:17 supports this: "Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word about Christ." So, we must get to know the Scriptures to be effective witnesses. We need to share biblical passages that teach about Christ, the need that the human being has of Him, and the power that He has to save and make us friends of God (John 5:24).

On the other hand, our personal testimony is good because it describes how our lives have changed, how we have got the peace and consolation of the Lord in difficult times, etc. Through our experiences, God can touch hearts and save sinners. Therefore, we need to share what the Bible teaches about Christ (his promises, commandments, and warnings), and what He has done in our lives. Christ is the only way, truth, and the life no one comes to the Father except through Him. (John 14:6).

Questions:

- What is essential to know and use when sharing your testimony? Explain.
- What are some biblical passages that can help you when you're witnessing?

III. People who recognize that salvation comes from God

After the great declaration of 2 Corinthians 5:17, Paul said that the new creature in Christ is part of the family of God. So, it's the Lord who saves us. When we're witnessing and someone becomes a Christian, it's not through our abilities, since only God is the one who saves sinners, the one who gives them faith, new life and transforms them. Only the Lord can do the work, and His will is sovereign.

You can testify with beautiful, wise, and biblical words, but this won't necessarily lead to the person being converted. It may also be that our testimony has grammatical flaws, little logic, awkwardness of fluidity, but the Lord in His grace uses it to help people get to know Him. The fact of new birth doesn't depend on the power of the message or testimony of the one who is witnessing, but upon God.

Jesus explained to His disciples that if they wanted to be his witnesses, it was essential (and always will be) that they receive His power: "... when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses..." (Acts 1:8). This implies that the work is of God, who acts through His Holy Spirit. We need to pray to Him for those who we're witnessing to, that they will make the right decision of faith, so that God may do His work in their lives. Maybe we will spend years witnessing and see no one accepting the Lord. The fact that the Lord is the one who gives salvation should free those of us who witness from frustration. The absence of results isn't unusual in the Christian experience. Jeremiah saw no fruit of his testimony decade after decade. Isaiah cried out: "Who believed our announcement?" (Isaiah 53:1a; Romans 10:16). But the end result of these ministries should encourage the sower to continue sowing the seed of the gospel. God, in His sovereignty, will ensure that the seed will bear fruit as He so determines. Man's happiness should be only in the Lord. It shouldn't depend on Christian achievement, which often leads some believers to self-idolatry.

Anyone who longs to obey God by witnessing effectively must have had a personal encounter with Christ, be a faithful Christian, and be a good role model for the person they are trying to reach out to. Paul said: "In everything set them an example by doing what is good. In your teaching show integrity, seriousness and soundness of speech..." (Titus 2:7). The witnessing Christian must have personally experienced the transformation they want to proclaim: "All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our flesh and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature deserving of wrath. But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy,

made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it's by grace you have been saved. And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, ..." (Ephesians 2:3-6).

In John 1:41-42, Andrew, who had previously heard John the Baptist preach and had followed Jesus, said to his brother Simon: "We have found the Messiah" and he brought him to Jesus. This man testified to his brother that he had found Jesus. Obviously, anyone can speak about God without really experiencing him themselves, but that would be a great tragedy. Can you imagine an unbeliever talking about the great sacrifice of Christ on the cross to provide salvation for the sinner under the wrath of God? Can such a person teach about Christ, who they have not met personally?

A good reputation is essential to validate our testimony, but in itself, without personal knowledge of the Savior, it's no more than mere personal pride. Only when we as witnesses have found Christ will we be able to testify effectively, speaking to others of Jesus Christ as our Savior.

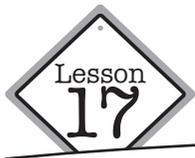
Andrew and the other disciple were excited and motivated when they found the Messiah, and they immediately looked for their friends, brothers and relatives. Out of love for God and for others, these men, having found Jesus Christ, were motivated to give the good news of salvation (John 1:35-45).

Questions:

- What personal requirement precedes an effective testimony?
- What would you say to those believers who think that they can change a person's heart by themselves? Explain.

Conclusion

We must all testify of God by announcing Christ, using the Word, having previously had a personal encounter with the Savior, and living a life of holiness for the glory of God and the benefit of his church.



God's People Share a Social Heritage

Loysbel Pérez Salazar (Cuba)

Passage to Study: Matthew 7:12, 25:35-46; Luke 4:18; Ephesians 6:9; Hebrews 13:3

Memory Verse: "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free" Luke 4:18.

Lesson Aim: To know our Biblical and Wesleyan heritage that emphasizes social compassion and how it can be applied to the current ministerial context.

Introduction

In the 18th century, a man made his mark on history. John Wesley was brought up in a Christian home where he received a lot of instruction from his mother. He became an icon of the 18th century revival in England. His life of fervor in the Spirit, his attachment to the Holy Scriptures, and his passion for the mission of God have remained as references for the history of Christianity.

His life of traveling to preach in different parts of the British Isles, and large doctrinal and theological volumes he wrote, made an impact on the social aspects of the world he lived in. He dealt with the existing social problems of his time, not only by questioning them, but also by creating alternative solutions in concrete ways.

Following the example of Christ, Wesley's theology was practical and mission-oriented. Dealing with different social problems was the focus of his life. The law of love was strong in Wesley's theology and action. So, in the preface to the first Methodist Hymnal published in 1739, Wesley wrote: "The gospel of Christ knows of no religion that isn't social, no holiness that isn't social holiness. We have this mandate from Christ, the one who loves God loves his brother too."

I. Caring for the poor (Luke 4:18a)

Wesley's perspective on caring for the poor was born from the example of Jesus as well as ordinances given by God in Scripture. Jesus was clear in His mission statement: "... because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor" (Luke 4:18a). The poor, for God, have always been an objective of his holistic mission. The understanding of these words was very refreshing for the Jewish thought of the first century. So much so that the parable of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-21) narrated by Jesus, was well known to the Sadducees (class predominantly rich in Israel), and had been used for centuries. But their version consisted of putting the rich man in the bosom of Abraham (heaven) and Lazarus, the beggar, in the place of

torment (Hades, hell).

Jesus told the above story differently, interchanging the destinations, so the rich man ended up in Hades, and the poor man in heaven. The amount of discomfort that our Master caused must be assumed. He made public the following divine truth: Heaven is also for the poor.

In the earthly ministry of the Lord Jesus, two aspects were very noticeable: his attitude towards the poor, and the commandments that He gave on their behalf (Matthew 11:5, 19:21). These teachings of the Master had an impact on the early church and on the apostolic writings (Galatians 2:10; James 2). John Wesley took these biblical truths very seriously. He also was deeply committed to helping the poor, and taught the church to work for the poor. He used to say that if there were poor folk in their congregations who were driven by hunger, trembling with cold and half-naked, those who had an abundance of the goods of this world, of food, drink and clothing, had to divide their bread with the hungry, and clothe those who had no nothing to wear.

Clearly for Wesley and the groups he was leading, responsibility to the poor was a maxim of his mission. This continues to be a fundamental call for the church today, since we're called to be on the side of the poor, and we must include a variety of compassionate actions (whether institutional or individual) on their behalf. These actions can include defending them, providing education and helping to meet basic human needs (health, food and clothing).

For those of us who are in the Wesleyan tradition, compassion must be implicit (Matthew 25:35-46). Deirdre Brower, in her thesis expresses it this way: "Each person must serve the less fortunate somehow. In doing so they will be truly holy, and will be being perfected. Wesley referred to the responsibility of looking after the 'poor' in society as an extraordinary means of grace for the giver, and strongly insisted that his followers could call themselves Christians only to the extent of their involvement in such activities."

The Church of the Nazarene has given much importance to the care of the poor and it's stated officially in paragraph 917 of the Manual 2017-2021 (pp. 317-318). It would be very timely to read the mentioned paragraph in class. Likewise, if you think that it's appropriate, you can ask for examples of practical ways that the church, as an institution, or some of the students, have cared for the poor. This can serve as a stimulus for everyone.

Questions:

- What did John Wesley say about the poor?
- How do you think our responsibility towards the poor should be focused today?

II. Freeing the slaves (Matthew 7:12; Ephesians 6:9)

Slavery has been practiced for millennia. Slaves made up a vulnerable stratum of society, and therefore were exposed to many sufferings. Richard Taylor makes the following analysis of the content of the New Testament with regard to slavery. "The New Testament doesn't directly condemn slavery. Rather, it accepts it as a contemporary social fact, but deals with the slave-master relationship in such a way that it presents slavery as a meaningless, if not unjustifiable, practice. Slaves and masters are brothers. In Christ they are all one, both slaves and freemen." (Galatians 3:28; Ephesians 6:9; Beacon Theological Dictionary. USA: CNP, 1995, p. 258). We must understand this in the context of the first century, where slavery was very different from the way it was in later centuries, or how we understand it today.

One of the most fatal practices applied to slaves was beating. In the first century, it could happen, but it wasn't a common practice. In fact, the normal term for "slave" in the New Testament is a term that in the early centuries usually referred to someone who sold himself into slavery. Later, it was especially used to refer to those who became slaves as spoils of war" (Koerper, RJ and Kerr, Susan. Introduction to the New Testament. USA: Editorial Global Action, 2018, p. 144).

The apostle Paul spoke the most about slavery, and in his letter to Philemon, he dealt with slave-master relations. This apostle also commanded that slaves converted to Christianity respect their masters to maintain the good witness before God, before the world, and even more so, if their masters were believers (1 Timothy 6:1-2).

Already by the 18th century in England, when John Wesley lived, the treatment of slaves was very cruel, and this motivated him to deal with the subject with great impetus. He openly denounced the slave trade, and supported the campaign that would eventually lead to the abolition of slavery.

Wesley saw the freedom that any human being should enjoy as a natural right granted by the Creator. So, violating this right was incompatible with the revelation of God and His immense mercy. This is part of the reasons that led him to maintain his position of condemning any form of slavery. Even though he lived in a society where slavery was legal, he always condemned this practice. His ideas on slavery are stated in one of his works: "It cannot be that, either by war or by contract, that any human being can be given as property to another, as is the case with sheep or oxen. Much less is it possible for any human creature to be born as a slave. Freedom is the right of every human creature, as soon as they breathe the vital air; and no human law can deprive us of such a right that comes from natural law" (Works of Wesley in González, Justo L. Vol. VII. USA: Editorial Wesley Heritage Foundation, p. 128).

Various biblical texts, such as Matthew 7:12 and John 8:36, were used heavily by John Wesley to affirm and declare his views on slavery. He paraphrased Matthew 7:12 as follows: "Be kind to every human being; and look to do invariably to others what you want others to do to you" (González, Justo L. Wesley's Works, volume VII. USA: Editorial Wesley Heritage Foundation, p. 128).

A biblical theology based on love of neighbor outlined the path for John Wesley and other friends like Wilberforce to work tirelessly for the abolition of slavery. They invested their lives to achieve this goal, and so it happened. Dorothy Bullon has put it this way: "Wesley's emphasis on love of neighbor is central to everything he taught, and inactive love wasn't what Wesley had in mind. Social service must be a vital feature of holiness and perfect love" (A Revival that Changed a Country, Spanish, p. 40). The position of the current church must be oriented in three specific actions on slavery:

- Opposition to any form of human slavery. Every man or woman is free before God, and they don't have to be under the dominion of anyone else, because each person has the capacity to freely lead his or her life.
- Because of Biblical teaching, we need to promote a mind-set that is oriented to the freedom that each of us has in ourselves. Relationships, whether marital or otherwise, can be a modern example of slavery when in many cases there is a sense of submission or ownership. This must be changed to sharing in equality.
- We need to help people today who live in modern slavery. The church must find ways to help people, who, due to their economic position, have had to sell themselves as slaves. One such example is the case of women who have given themselves up as slaves to the sex business.

If you think it appropriate, ask the students how modern slavery is manifested in the country where they live.

Questions:

- Explain why Wesley opposed the slavery of his time.
- What is your opinion of slavery that exists today. What do you think should be the position of the church?

III. The prisoners (Matt. 25:35-46; Hebrews 13:3)

The writer of Hebrews wrote a large number of recommendations to the church, including Hebrews 13:3. Here, he referred to the responsibility we have towards prisoners. This is a divine mandate that propels us to do work for them, as we do for ourselves. It's not about doing something easy, or completing some plan, but it must be motivated by deep love.

Jesus had already spoken about action towards prisoners in Matthew 25:36-40. This He exposed in a context where He was referring to our eternal destiny at the end of time. To focus more deeply on the matter, the Lord warned that the one who care for prisoners, whoever they are, are in fact looking after Him (v. 40). These words of the Master were a benchmark for the apostles, the early church, and the ministry of the church throughout all centuries.

John Wesley was no exception. He strongly denounced the conditions in the prisons of his time. He devoted much of his life and ministry to serving prisoners in their material needs and in the deep needs of their soul. One of the prisons Wesley visited was Newgate in London. He wrote an article in the London Chronicle in 1761: "Of all the centers of affliction, this side of hell, little, I suppose, exceeds or even equals Newgate (...) so great is the filth and the stench, misery and evil, that shakes anyone who still has a spark of humanity in their soul. I am your humble servant, John Wesley" (in Edwards, Maldwin. John Wesley and the Eighteenth Century London: Epworth Press, 1933, p. 149).

Wesley was tireless in his task of helping prisoners. The churches of the Wesleyan tradition need to take up the responsibility to care for prisoners based on what the New Testament tells us, as well as the example of Wesley.

Today's church has many well-meaning compassionate ministries for prisoners. The prison chaplaincy is a strong ministry within the church, but so much more could be achieved. It would be helpful to diagnose the number of prisons that are located in our ministerial contexts and evaluate the work being done in them by local churches.

The action of the church must be more imperative and directed in multiple orders:

- Prophetic role. Work on the rights that the prisoners might have.
- Assist prisoners and their families financially.

- Visit prisons and share the Bible with the inmates and staff.

The church cannot be satisfied with ministries that are only within the four walls of the meeting place, and the church's finances must be directed to the care of these people. We shouldn't wait for a ministry among prisoners to be formed. We shouldn't depend solely on the action of the church as an institution. Responsibility to prisoners is personal, that is, each them is a child of God. So, we can do things without waiting for a bureaucratic process to carry them out. If there is a need and prisoners are without attention and are suffering, we have a duty to respond. Check things out in your community. Maybe there is someone who has a family member in prison. Find a way to help them, always motivated by the love of Christ in your life.

One of my pastoral tasks has been to visit prisons. In one of them, I was able to help a prisoner for seven years whose wife was a member of the church. We helped him in everything he needed, and through him, we were able to reach other inmates in prison and develop an active ministry in the various prisons that this gentleman was in. Doing this work, we were able to help people avoid committing suicide, and we created times to help them through counseling and financial provision. But one of the fruits of that ministry today is that although this brother is still serving his sentence, he's now no longer in prison, he's one of the pastors who is planting one of the daughter churches that our church of the Nazarene has in the town of Alquízar.

What one experiences in prison is very difficult. Prisoners, as well as their families, need Wesleyan Christians who are willing to show the love of Jesus and thus, help alleviate the physical and soul pains they experience there.

Questions:

- What did Jesus say about our responsibility towards prisoners?
- What did John Wesley do for the prisoners of his time?
- What can the church and believers do for prisoners?

Conclusion

Today's societies need Christians who embody the life of Jesus, and who show their love in this world. Believers are needed to spend time caring for the poor, for modern slaves, and for prisoners, just like John Wesley, an ordinary man in eighteenth-century England, who wasn't limited by a church building, a country, a society, a family, well-being, or structures, to work in favor of the needy, and achieve social changes that were radical and historical.



God's People and Civil Governments

Marcial Rubio (Peru)

Passage to Study: Romans 13:1-8

Memory Verse: "Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God" Romans 13:1.

Lesson Aim: To understand the prophetic role of God's people in the political context where they live.

Introduction

The church and the state are two institutions established by God. Each one has been given a mission to fulfill, and neither should usurp the other's sphere of authority, because when this happens, confusion is inevitable. The mission of the church is to preach the gospel of the kingdom of God, and the responsibility of the State is to order society, protect life, ensure the safety of its citizens, protect property and administer justice.

Christians aren't in a social bubble, but part of society. Therefore, our participation in the political life of our country is inherent because we're citizens. This doesn't mean that we necessarily adhere to a political party; we must be respectful and be a faithful fulfillment of the order established by God.

While it's true that the church, as an institution, shouldn't be involved in political parties, believers (as good and better citizens) should ensure that the best leaders are chosen, that the best laws are enacted and that they are applied fairly. We must not overlook the good testimony of godly leaders like Joseph in Egypt, Daniel in Babylon and Queen Esther in Persia, who exercised ministries of spiritual significance with repercussions on the economic, social, political and moral life of pagan peoples; and consider that God can use men and women consecrated to Him as useful instruments for his glory.

I. Civil government was instituted by God

A. Earthly government was established by God

The gospel of the kingdom of Heaven isn't tainted with any earthly political passion. Rather, it presents Jesus as the King of kings and the Lord of lords; that is to say, He occupies the seat of maximum authority. All earthly authorities are accountable to Him for how they have exercised their government because "...The authorities

that exist have been established by God..." (Romans 13:1). So the rulers, from the king, the President of the Republic, the legislators, the magistrates, the police, the army and the mayor of the city, are authorities that fulfill functions delegated by God. It doesn't matter what the system of government is or if the officials are Christians or atheists. They all fulfill functions established by God, to whom they will finally have to give an account.

B. The civil government authorities are servants of God

The civil magistrate has the power of the sword (coercion). The state is authorized to use dispersive force in order to ensure justice, and protect the internal order and borders of the country. Civil authorities govern by law, enforcing it by coercive legal means. Although governments with the power of arms have the authority to exercise even the death penalty in some countries and participate in just wars, they will be responsible before God for their use of force and power.

C. Are all the laws fair?

Many issues can be legal, but not everything legal is fair. Christians are called to be role models of civil obedience whenever possible. We honor Christ by praying for those in authority over us, being submissive and obedient to his laws (Romans 13:1,5; 1 Timothy 2:1-2). We must obey the magistrates as long as they don't order us to do something contrary to what God commands or prohibits (Acts 5:29). In both cases, we have to discern and choose when to obey and when to disobey the authorities. This situation isn't easy, as Peter and John knew to what extent they needed to obey the authorities of their time. We will be able to discern with the help of the Holy Spirit.

Furthermore, civil disobedience is a right enshrined in legal systems of rule of law. Even when living under authoritarian regimes, we have some Biblical examples of God-approved civil disobedience: Egypt's midwives disregarded Pharaoh's order (Exodus 1:17); Daniel and his friends in Babylon (Daniel 1:1-21), among others.

Questions:

- What is God's purpose for civil governments?
- Do you consider that a wicked government has been set by God? Explain.

II. Christians must submit to the government

A. For the Lord's sake

The primary reason we should obey the authorities is to be a good witness to them (1 Peter 2:13-14). The recipients of Paul's letter to the Romans lived under the rule of the tyranny of an absolute regime (Roman Empire). But they didn't oppose the emperor's policy, nor that of their enemies. Quite simply, Paul sent instructions on the Christian's duty towards the civil rulers of his time, calling his readers to pay special respect and honor to those in power under God's authority. It's from this perspective that we should look at our authorities. They act as servants of God, and they must honor the name of the President or King whom they represent here on Earth.

B. To avoid punishment

Civil authorities, whatever the system of government, are empowered to administer justice by punishing those who commit crimes against society (Romans 13:4). But as Adam Clarke points out: "... that power has been entrusted not to terrorize and oppress the just but to intimidate and punish the wicked. If you don't want to live in fear of the authorities, respect the laws" (Commentary on the Holy Bible, volume III. USA: CNP, 1976, p. 370).

Christian citizens must lead lives pleasing to God, living in the light of the Holy Scriptures as the Lord has ordered. If we do this we'll receive the approval of the governing authorities. Furthermore, before occupying positions of leadership and authority, Christian citizens must learn to submit and obey the public authorities. Regardless of whether many are unfair or bad, they're there to enforce the laws.

C. For reasons of conscience

Like every human being, Christians will definitely want to avoid the punishment that results from disobedience to the laws established in their respective country. But there are other reasons why people submit to their rulers. Some of these are as follows: for the sake of conscience (Romans 13:5); and, because rulers are recognized as servants of God (Romans 13:6).

The standards for the Christian conscience can be summed up:

1. Obey the authorities, so that by this means we can spread the gospel and win others to Christ; a
2. Obey civil law, which is better than revolting and rebellion, just as long as it doesn't oppose the law of God.

Questions:

- Is submission and obedience owed to a corrupt and abusive government? Comment.
- Do you consider that obedience to civil authorities has any limits? Comment.

III. How to submit to the civil government

A. Submitting to the government system

The duty of all Christians is to submit to the rulers and the laws of their respective country. John MacArthur said the following: "Every Christian, regardless of the form of government in which they live, are called to obey the command of the Lord in the sense of remaining in due and profitable submission to that government so as to be able to lead a peaceful life and maintain an effective witness" (New Testament Commentary, Romans. USA: Editorial Portavoz, 2012, p. 221). The Christian must always act within the law in the various spheres in which he operates: business, family, employment, municipal regulations, traffic regulations, etc. When we move to another country, we must submit to that country's immigration laws.

However, this obedience to the laws isn't about blind and limitless submission, for there are absurd laws that collide with divine laws, and work against the dignity of the human person, for example: a law that legalizes abortion, euthanasia, incest, the "marriage union" between people of the same sex, etc. In cases like these, Christian citizens have to choose between obeying God or men.

Jesus' disciples disregarded the order of the Jewish leaders that prohibited them from preaching in the name of Jesus (Acts 4:18-19). When human laws conflict with God's laws, the Christian must always abide by divine laws, even if he has to pay dearly for it.

B. Paying your taxes

The financial plan for the support of the state apparatus is the tax system. Tax fraud is one of the most common crimes. "Nobody likes to pay taxes, but paying taxes is part of Christian life ... no citizen, and especially no Christian one, has any justification for evading the payment of taxes by illegal or unethical means" (MacArthur, John. New Testament Commentary, Romans. USA: Editorial Portavoz, 2012, p. 247).

Christ gave us an example by paying his taxes to support the house of God (Matthew 17:24-27), and he exhorted us saying: "So give back to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's" (Matthew 22:21). Our duty is to pay our taxes, and the government's duty is to use these funds correctly for the benefit of the people. If we don't, we will be accountable to God. But we don't have the right to stop paying taxes just because we simply don't approve of the government that is in power.

C. Maintaining good interpersonal relationships

The Lord Jesus Christ taught us to live the law of love. Love of God is natural and spontaneous obedience to the first commandment, and love of neighbor is the natural and spontaneous fulfillment of the second commandment (Matthew 22:37-39). If every citizen in the world lived a life of love, there would be no immorality, robberies, murders, rapes, influence peddling, illicit enrichment, etc. But since it has not yet happened that the whole world turns to God in repentance and conversion of their sins, every Christian is called to be "the light of the world" and "the salt of the earth" (Matthew 5:13-14). Therefore, it's we who know Christ who are called to be citizens who show the character of Christ. This is the permanent debt that Christians have towards society.

Christians have dual citizenship: that of their earthly country and that of their heavenly homeland. In relation to the first, we live under earthly law, and as citizens of heaven, we live under a much higher law: the law of love. And where the love of God reigns, no harm will be done to one's neighbor (Romans 13:10).

Questions:

- What should be the attitude of a Christian towards tax evasion?
- How can we maintain good interpersonal relationships as citizens?

Conclusion

The church and the state are two institutions established by God. Each of them has its respective mission and is responsible before the Lord for the fulfillment of its functions. Civil authorities were ordained by God and have the power to administer justice. This responsibility has been delegated to them by God. So, when a government claims autonomy, it becomes a usurper of God's authority, and it becomes despotic, abusive and corrupt. The Christian must submit to the authority of the government as long as it doesn't contravene the laws of God.



God's People and the Family

Máximo García (Peru)

Passage to Study: I Corinthians 7:2-11; Ephesians 6:1,4; I Timothy 5:4

Memory Verse: "God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. God blessed them and said to them, 'Be fruitful and increase in number...'" Genesis 1:27-28a.

Lesson Aim: To apply the basic principles of the Word of God to the various family problems that we experience today.

Introduction

We need to rescue God's design for the family today in the 21st century. The vertigo of today's life has been dragging and destroying many families. How many families are based on the wise counsel of scripture today? Living as loving families requires time and energy, both scarce commodities today. What we need most today is to discover the meaningful experience of *koinonia*. This rich biblical term is generally translated as "fellowship." It refers to "fellowship or deep communion of New Testament Christians" (Taylor, Grider and Taylor. *Beacon Theological Dictionary*. USA: CNP, 1984, p. 389). Families too need to live in close fellowship.

In this lesson, we'll study the principles that God has left us in His Word to be better able to face the different problems that families experience today.

I. God's original design for the family

The history of the origin of the family is mentioned in the book of Genesis. The Bible says: "The Lord God said, 'It's not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him'" (Genesis 2:18). Then God made Adam fall asleep, He extracted a rib; and from it He made Eve, whom He then presented to Adam (Genesis 2:20-22). Adam and Eve thus formed the first marriage of humanity, created by God (Genesis 1:27-28). Because of this perfect creation, God affirmed: "That is why a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they become one flesh. Adam and his wife were both naked, and they felt no shame" (Genesis 2:24-25).

We can affirm that God brought the first married couple together and they lived in perfect union. This union involved physical, mental and emotional aspects, which resulted in them being complements to one another. In one sense, although they were two people, they were merged together into one entity, or as the

Bible puts it, "one flesh." The husband-wife relationship is inclusive as it comprises two beings, a man and a woman. But at the same time, it's exclusive, since it occurs only between the two of them.

Deuteronomy 5:21 says: "You shall not covet your neighbor's wife ..." This speaks to us of the divine original design which indicates that a spouse shouldn't wish to have another partner; married people must live exclusively for their spouses. This biblical principle is even to be applied to our thought life. The Lord Jesus made this clear: "But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart" (Matthew 5:28).

Married men or women should take care of their thoughts, not giving rise to the temptation to desire to have sexual relations with someone other than their spouse. This special union was thus designed by God to be perpetual, as long as both spouses live on Earth. So, the Lord doesn't want divorces. Let's remember what the Master taught us: "...Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate" (Matthew 19:6). This may be a problem for some of us, but what is clear is that God's design and plan for marriages is that they live in perfect harmony, and never get divorced.

As well, the biblical concept of family speaks to us of God's desire that love and respect be lavished within marriage, and among all members of the family. The Bible says: "Husbands, love your wives, and don't be harsh with them" (Colossians 3:19). The term "harsh" refers to unpleasant treatment or lack of kindness.

As we can see, God's plan for marriages, for families, is perfect. This is how it was designed from the beginning. However, when sin entered humanity, this original design was distorted. The perfect male-female relationship within marriage changed because of the evil that entered the human heart.

This started with the first couple, Adam and Eve. Genesis 3:9-10, says: "But the Lord God called to the man, "Where are you?" He answered, "I heard you in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; so, I hid." From that moment on, the perfect harmony between Adam and Eve was damaged, and problems began to arise between them. Practically, the husband blamed his disastrous decision to disobey on his wife. Notice Adam's response when God asked him if he had eaten from the tree that He had told them not to eat from: "...The woman you put here with me—she gave me some fruit from the tree, and I ate it" (Genesis 3:12). After this, Adam and Eve began to have negative attitudes and emotions of fear and shame, and they tried to justify their mistakes.

Today, families are very much like the first family after the fall. As a result, we can see that there is a lot of sexual relationships between couples before marriage, as well as infidelity, divorces, single parents, etc. This often leads to the following generations living in dysfunctional families, with incalculably dire consequences.

Questions:

- Why did the Lord say "... It's not good that the man should be alone?" (Genesis 2:18)?
- What does the Bible mean when it says, "Therefore a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife ..." (Genesis 2:24)?

II. The reality of twenty-first century families

The scenario of many families is both gloomy and tragic. When we look at this world in which our children have to grow up, we feel sadness. The panorama presents a world eaten away by sin, and which appears to get worse by the day. Currently, individualism prevails among many spouses. Thus, after getting married, many men continue to see themselves as the single people that they were before. They make their own decisions and pursue their lives for the sake of personal advancement regardless of what their wife might think. Many wives still see themselves as the young ladies they were before getting married and they make crucial decisions without talking it through in advance with their husbands or considering the well-being of their children. This reality reflects the selfishness rooted in people's hearts.

There is an alarming increase in the divorce rate, even within Christian couples. Understanding and obeying the precepts given by God in His Word will help us understand that marriage is meant to be indissoluble. He designed it that way from the start, and our Lord Jesus confirmed it (Matthew 19:6). Consequently, we need to

consider that each marriage must work at maintaining unity with the help of God. Part of this can be achieved by deciding to treat each member well, using kind words, and expressing love practically in our relationships with our spouse and children. Abuse shouldn't be allowed to break out in the family domain, in any form. God is love (1 John 4:8), and we have been called to be holy and loving children, imitators of Him (Ephesians 5:1-2).

Sadly, today we see in the news the increase of domestic violence which can lead to femicide. This must not take place among God's people. There is never any justification for a husband beating his wife, or vice versa. On the contrary, the command of God is that the man treat his wife as the Word says: "Husbands, in the same way be considerate as you live with your wives, and treat them with respect as the weaker partner and as heirs with you of the gracious gift of life, so that nothing will hinder your prayers" (1 Peter 3:7). Many of the problems in families begin with this issue of the quality of treatment among their members.

This also goes for violence in families. We sadly recall the case of the first murder in humanity which occurred between two brothers: Cain and Abel (Genesis 4:1-16), both sons of Adam and Eve. Stories like these are still going on in today's world. Many families go downhill, and it becomes imperative that as God's people we bring the light of Christ to these families who are living in the darkness of evil, weary of their situation, but without the ability to break or leave the vicious and vertiginous circle of evil.

Questions:

- Name two characteristics of non-believing families.
- How is the panorama of husband-wife treatment and vice versa presented in the current marriage context where you live?

III. The character of a Christian family

The Bible says: "...so that you may become blameless and pure - children of God without fault in a warped and crooked generation. Then you will shine among them like stars in the sky" (Philippians 2:15). This mandate applies to us personally, but it's also relevant in our relationship with our spouse and the rest of the family. Faced with the disastrous panorama that many families suffer, Christian couples and families need to preach the redemptive message of Jesus Christ through words, but mainly, by showing what a real Christian family looks like.

What characteristics should a Christian family have? The Bible says that we will be known by our fruit (Matthew 7:20). So, the way we run our families must show that we really belong to the Lord.

The Christian family needs to have genuine faith. We live in a world where appearance has become so relevant and is emphasized too much. But we need to be real, authentic and true. Paul told Timothy: "I am reminded of your sincere faith, which first lived in your grandmother Lois and in your mother Eunice and, I am persuaded, now lives in you also" (2 Timothy 1:5). Clearly, it's seen here that the mother of this young disciple, as well as his grandmother had sincere faith.

The second characteristic of a Christian family is that it's totally committed to the Lord and His work. The Bible says: "Don't you know that when you offer yourselves to someone as obedient slaves, you're slaves of the one you obey—whether you're slaves to sin, which leads to death, or to obedience, which leads to righteousness? But thanks be to God that, though you used to be slaves to sin, you have come to obey from your heart the pattern of teaching that has now claimed your allegiance. You have been set free from sin and have become slaves to righteousness" (Romans 6:16-18). If we have been set free by Christ, then we need to serve Him with all of our hearts and minds. As He gave his whole life out of love for us, then how can we not respond to God's love by giving ourselves completely to Him.

It's sad to see that many families aren't fully committed to the Lord and His redemptive work. They make various excuses to avoid responsibilities or tasks in the church. But how beautiful it is to see parents and children serving God together, full of joy! This sets a good precedent, and these families present a good testimony to others who are beginning in the Christian life.

The third characteristic of a Christian family is that unconditional love is lavished among its members. The Bible says: "Follow God's example, therefore, as dearly loved children and walk in the way of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God" (Ephesians 5:1-2). As God's children we must reflect God's love in our families at all times. This will impact other families. Families where there is love will build good foundations for society. God's love must always guide interpersonal relationships between members of a family.

We read of heroic deeds that parents do to save their children, or even siblings who sacrifice themselves for the other members of the family. Examples like these set good precedents in a society in which parents' love for children is almost dying. As followers of Christ, we must be the light to shine in this world, always reflecting God's love.

The fourth characteristic that a Christian family must have is that it must be united. Its members are called to be one in Christ. We see this unity displayed in the relationship between our heavenly Father, our Lord Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit. Jesus prayed for us to be united.

We must apply this in our family context. If we're one in Christ, there will be no room for division, lawsuits, or the like. Rather, there will be parents who are willing to give to each other and to their children, and similarly, children who love their parents and each other.

They say: "Healthy families, healthy churches." If our family relationships are directed and blessed by God, this will be reflected in our churches as they seek more of Christ. So, in face of the panorama of family disjunction that exists today, our Christian families urgently need to be good witnesses.

Questions:

- What is the character of a Christian family?
- What is the impact of the good witness of a Christian family?
- What do you think will happen if this doesn't happen?

Conclusion

God created the family. The first family began in fellowship with God. In the beginning, everything was perfect, but everything changed because of sin. The male-female relationship in the marital context, suffered serious alterations from the original design of its Creator. But, He had a wonderful plan - He sent His Son Jesus Christ to save all the families on Earth. Now, we're called to bear good witness and announce that in Christ there is hope to resolve all kinds of family conflicts.



God's People Defend Life

Marcela Aguirre (Argentina)

Passage to Study: Psalm 139:13-16

Memory Verse: "...He himself gives everyone life and breath and everything else" Acts 17:25.

Lesson Aim: To value the responsibility we have as a church to oppose abortion and create spaces to help mothers and children.

Introduction

Every year, the number of abortions in the world increases. Among the factors that contribute to this are the progress of abortion medicine and surgical techniques that have diminished or eliminated the risks of such operations. The increasing permissiveness and social acceptance of termination of pregnancies, the excessive demographic growth capable of causing governments to promote the practice of abortion in order to control the population, fear of pregnancies with physical defects detectable by prenatal diagnosis, the emancipation of women and the increase of personal motivations, underestimation of the fetus or embryo, situations of social injustice and poverty, deficiencies in education, culture and lack of adequate housing and work, etc. all contribute to the increase in the number of abortions carried out.

Abortion is capable of removing the intrinsic value of creation, established by God. It's something undesirable that, although it's presented as something which liberates, always carries bitter baggage of anguish, oppression, injustice and loneliness. Some studies show that if a woman who wishes to have an abortion is told about the value of the life she carries in her womb, she may give up abortion and look for another solution. In this lesson, we'll study our responsibility as the Lord's church regarding this abortion issue.

I. The value of intrauterine life

A. Biblical perspective

In the Bible, there are many references to human life in the womb. Perhaps the most recognized is that of Psalm 139:13-16. In it, the psalmist, looking back at the beginning of his life, declared: "For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well. My frame wasn't hidden from you when I was made in the secret place, when I was woven together in the depths of the earth. Your eyes saw my unformed body..."

John Stott, in his book entitled "Issues Facing Christianity Today" in the chapter: 'The Dilemma of Abortion', argues that this passage from Psalm 139 makes three important claims about human life before birth. Let's look at them.

The first statement points out that the unborn baby or fetus is *God's creation*. It's He who wove it together. Two metaphors are used to illustrate God's creative capacity: the potter and the weaver. God is like a skilled craftsman who "formed" us, just as a potter models clay. The same thought is repeated in Job 10:8, where Job claimed that God's hands 'made' and 'formed' him. Also, the other illustration Job mentioned was that of the weaver: "...clothe me with skin and flesh and knit me together with bones and sinews?" (Job 10:11). Although the biblical writers didn't set out to offer a scientific account of fetal development, they did affirm that the process of embryonic growth isn't automatic or a product of chance, but the work of divine creative capacity.

The second statement that the psalmist highlighted is *continuity*. At the time of writing Psalm 139, he was an adult. But, he looked back to the time when he wasn't yet born. He referred to himself before and after birth because he was aware that during his prenatal and postnatal life, he was the same person. He also recognized four stages in his life. The first (v. 1): "You have searched me (the past). The second (v. 1b): "Lord, and you know me" (the present). The third (v. 10): "Your hand will guide me (the future). And the fourth (v. 13): "you knit me together in my mother's womb" (the prenatal stage).

In all four stages (before birth, from birth to the present, in the past and in the future), the psalmist referred to himself as 'I'. He who thinks and writes as an adult has the same personal identity as the fetus that was in its mother's womb. He doesn't recognize any discontinuity between his prenatal and postnatal being. On the contrary, inside and outside his mother's womb, before and after birth, as an embryo, baby, young and old, he was aware that he was the same person.

The third affirmation that the psalmist expressed was *communion*. Thus, he recognized a personal and very particular communion between God and himself. The same God who had created him was the one who sustained him, knew him, loved him, and would forever hold him firmly. Our Creator loved us and related to us long before we could respond to Him in a conscious relationship. So, each of us was already a person in the womb, and God already knew us and loved us.

Scott expressed that these three words: creation, continuity and communion, give us the essential biblical perspective to understand that the fetus is a human life that, although it has not yet matured, has the potential to grow to the fullness of life; it already possessed human individuality (Stott, John. *Issues Facing Christianity Today*. USA: Libros Desafío 1999, pp. 329-352).

Other biblical references to life before birth reinforce these principles: God called Isaiah and Jeremiah before they were born (Isaiah 49:1; Jeremiah 1:5), even before they were able to hear or understand their calling (Psalm 22:9-10, 71:6, 119:73; Luke 1:15, 41-44). Genesis 25:22-23 mentions that Esau and Jacob fought in the womb, showing the beginning of the competitive and combative strategy that would later characterize their family life.

B. Scientific perspective

Four scientific evidences are going to be mentioned that establish that the embryo is a perfectly organized human being.

1. Genetic identity

Two systems stop working individually; and they constitute a new system that has a new genetic code, unique and unrepeatable. The end result is a human individual unlike his parents.

2. Organization of the embryo

Fertilization is the first process in the organization of the embryo. It occurs in the fallopian tubes. It begins with the contact of the gametes, in which generally only one sperm manages to pass through the outer membrane of the ovule, taking about 20 minutes to do so. After this, it takes about 20 hours to fertilize the egg, fusing with it to combine the genetic material. From the first cell division the functional identity of the cells of the embryo is determined.

3. Maternal-fetal immune-tolerance

The mother develops a complex immune-tolerance mechanism which allows a foreign body, her child, to be introduced into her body without suffering rejection. Molecular components are released between mother and child that inhibit the action of T lymphocytes, which produce toxic substances for the embryo; and B lymphocytes, responsible for the production of the rejection antibodies.

4. Biochemical dialogue between the embryo and its mother

It starts from the embryo that sends chemical messages (chorionic gonadotropin hormone) stimulating the function of the ovary to support the new being. This happens when it's barely 1.5 mm long on the sixth day of its development. This dialogue allows it to advance with the appropriate speed to access the uterus at the precise moment for its implantation, which must be reached in a very short period of time. This phase occurs between day six and twelve. If it can get implanted, it will be in the body of its mother for about 40 weeks, and it won't cease in its development if it has the adequate means and doesn't suffer external action.

But keep in mind that the development and maturation is a process that lasts about 800 weeks, about 20 years, but the new being will only be 40 weeks in the womb. What happens is that the same individual will be going through different stages.

Now think about this: is a child worth less than an adult? Of course not! Nor is it worth less at twelve weeks or newly fertilized. Both the Bible and science show us that it's not an amorphous growth of cells, but from the first day, the new person shows his/her individuality, functionality, and looks for a relationship with the mother's body to be accepted.

So why not help that woman who plans to abort to understand and emotionally accept this little being developing in her body, which her body has already accepted? If you find it helpful in explaining this part of the lesson, you can look for pictures that will help illustrate embryonic development to your students.

Questions:

- According to the biblical passages studied, what opinion do you have about intrauterine life? (Psalm 139:13-16; Job 10:11)
- Do you consider that we can find a correlation between what the Bible says and science says regarding the origin of life in the womb? Justify.

II. The value of the pregnant woman

In recent years, in many countries, a law has been debated that justifies the death of an unborn child because of concerns for the mother's life. Actually, we're all concerned about the life of women, but abortion isn't the solution. The woman who has an abortion goes through severe stress, and even in the best conditions, is exposed to a risky procedure. Abortion is the quick response to serious social problems, sustained by economic inequalities, abuse, gender violence, etc.

A survey of women in France, the country where abortion is decriminalized, resulted in 85% of those surveyed declaring that they are in favor of abortion.

One of the questions asked women who had had an abortion was: Why did you abort? And the word “pressure” was the most common response; pressure that ends in suffering and pain. Much of the pain can be seen in the mother’s behavior; how she relates to people, the headaches, tears, or irritability. 61% answered: “There are too many abortions in our country”; and 83% expressed: “Abortion leaves psychological traces difficult for women to live with”. 60% stated: “Society should help women avoid abortion”, (IFOP, 2010. Data retrieved from the French Institute of Public Opinion, BiotecaBlog).

A Chilean program, called “Comprehensive Support for Pregnant Women Who Are Considering Abortion”, in 17 years made it possible for almost 5,000 children to be born and given up for adoption. 85% of the women chose to continue their pregnancy (Data recovered from the Fundación Chile Unido, <http://www.Embarazonodeseado.cl/>).

One of the most important studies showing that the legalization of abortion isn’t related to the decrease in maternal mortality was carried out in Chile, by Dr. Elard Koch, epidemiologist and director of the Melisa Institute. He analyzed vital statistics in Chile over a period of 50 years (1957-2007); and showed that the abortion ban in that country didn’t increase maternal mortality, but decreased it by 93.7%.

Chile carried out some successful strategies to reduce maternal mortality: They increased the level of education of women; provided complementary nutrition for pregnant women and their children; offered fertility control by providing contraceptive methods; improved the sanitary system (for example: access to clean drinking water and sewers); gave psychological, social, employment, and financial support, etc. and provided universal access to quality women’s health services.

Questions:

- Is abortion the quick answer to serious social problems? Explain.
- How can we help a woman who is considering the option of an abortion?

III. Our role as Christians

Many countries aspire to have a liberal society that wants to be advanced, but varnishes the reality of abortion with a layer of legal progressivism where it’s suggested that the

weak can be sacrificed for the sake of not ‘causing harm to the physical or emotional health of the woman’. But this isn’t the path for Christians.

The Bible says in James 2:26 that faith without works is dead. Love of neighbor is the heart of the Christian message; therefore, we can’t look at abortion from a distant or cold perspective. The abortion problem affects us all, and the reality of this practice shouldn’t leave us indifferent; it’s incompatible with the justice of God.

Today in the face of these social changes, we need Christians who are prepared to occupy places in society from which we can defend life. Beyond going to a march and showing our position, we have to realize that Christian lawyers are needed to defend the rights of the unborn child; and work on simpler adoption laws where a family doesn’t get old waiting to adopt an infant.

We also need doctors who are conscientious objectors, and show that they were trained to save lives, not to destroy them. Likewise, social workers are required to be in the field, seeing the needs of these women to sustain them, and psychologists who can emotionally support them. As the Lord’s church, we need to be those men and women who are challenged to create spaces to teach, care, and guide people.

Two conscientious midwives risked their careers by respecting the life of a newborn, Moses, who later became the deliverer of the people of Israel (Exodus 1:2; 1-10). Mary, a mother with an unexpected pregnancy, in a social culture against unwed mothers, went to seek support from her cousin Elizabeth, and accepted the will of God. The result was the birth of Jesus, who brought salvation to each of us.

Questions:

- Based on what you have studied, do you consider that we’re prepared as a church to face this challenge imposed by the new society in which we’re immersed? Justify.
- What could we implement as a church to decrease the number of abortions?

Conclusion

The Word of God advises us in Psalm 82:4 the following: “Rescue the weak and the needy; deliver them from the hand of the wicked’ Let’s find a way to help both the confused mother who is planning to abort, and that helpless child. Both deserve to be valued and respected.



God's People

Care About Children

Yelka Reaño de Bernales (Peru)

Passage to Study: Matthew 19:13-14

Memory Verse: "And he said: 'Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven'" Matthew 18:3.

Lesson Aim: To understand the importance of pastoral care focused on children, based on the different problems that children face today.

Introduction

When we meet a child, we find a life full of surprises. Also, where there is a child, everything is different. Children are very special creatures of God. In the course of history, some were famous because of their joyful very heroic actions, while others stood out as protagonists of very sad and unfortunate outcomes.

Childhood is a stage of human life in which activities have very particular characteristics and each is different from any other. All this makes this time unique, special and very crucial. The skills and abilities acquired will be the basis for the following stages until adulthood is reached.

Children can jump or run throughout the day, and very rarely look tired or bored, since they always find something to move about for. Their social and communication skills are also developing and they start learning various subjects such as mathematics, history, science, technology, etc.

In the spiritual area, they're very spontaneous in their prayers. Almost always, they are intercessors, and their prayers are expressed in very simple and precise words. They also have the capacity to believe all spiritual matters; they don't question God, they just trust Him.

All children have needs, which are basic. For example:

- a. physical needs: food, shelter and protection;
- b. mental needs: power to make decisions and make plans;
- c. emotional needs: sense of belonging, approval and recognition, expressions of unconditional love and acceptance, freedom within defined limits, humor and the opportunity to laugh;

- d. spiritual needs: forgiveness for mistakes and the possibility of starting again, certainty of acceptance by God, experience in prayer; witnessing the answers to prayers, opportunity to grow in grace and in the knowledge of God.

These needs should be met by adults close to children.

I. Jesus blesses and protects children (Matthew 19:13-14)

A. Jesus blesses the children

It's very likely that the parents of the children presented to the Lord were part of the crowd that followed the Master. Therefore, they knew that the Lord's blessing could also be had by their children (Matthew 13).

The blessings we receive from God can be material, but these have a beginning and an end, because they are temporary. We also receive other divine blessings which are spiritual. They are available to everyone in Christ Jesus, and they go on to eternity (John 6:37b).

As parents, we must go to the Lord lifting up our children to Him in prayer, asking Him to bless them every day of their lives. This begins with dedicating our little ones to God, even from their prenatal stage. We must continue with a sustained lifestyle of prayer for them, as well as accompanying them in their daily walk. This won't always be easy because of the multiple responsibilities we have as parents, but it's very necessary. God wants to bless children, and He wants them to draw near to Him.

B. Jesus protects children

The Jewish people had very particular characteristics. One of these was that women and children weren't considered to be important in public events or in statistics, and they had no rights. Knowing these discriminations, Jesus, whose mission was and is to restore and give protection to the helpless, took care of the children (Matthew 19:14) and warned about the need to help them (Matthew 18:5). This warning of Jesus to the adults of that time continues today.

It's important to care for children and help them in moments of sadness and decisions that can affect their whole lives. Children are in danger of religious sects that teach wrong doctrines to children, of people who capture children to teach them how to use weapons and kill, and of individuals who teach children to steal and then include them in their gangs.

There are also Christian adults who neglect their children, and don't instruct them as they should in the Word of God. Their actions aren't consistent with their testimony, and by doing this, they allow their children to be influenced by television or social media programs with violent, anti-Christian, corrupt and morally-lacking content. The saddest thing is that they don't encourage children to go to church or get involved in children's programs. The result is that these children grow up influenced by the world. By doing this they cause the children to stumble by not fulfilling their responsibility to instruct their children from an early age as God has taught us (Proverb 22:6).

It's necessary to know that the customs of children in the time of Jesus were very different from those that we know today. At that time, girls were educated by mothers, and remained with them until marriage. Boys were only with their mother during early childhood. Later, they accompanied their father and older brothers on a daily basis. They also learned their father's professions, which they consequently followed.

Regarding age, a person was considered a child until the age of 12, and from 13 on, they became a young adult, with all the responsibilities concerning this stage. Adolescence wasn't acknowledged as a developmental stage as in our days. Before age 12, they were even considered a lower category in society, and officially, didn't have human rights in their favor as our current laws, and were unable to make decisions. They also had no right to possessions. They owed absolute respect to parents and siblings over 12 years old. A girl was promised for marriage at the age of 12, and it was the father who arranged the marriage with the man.

Children were seen as reckless, fragile and foolish creatures. However, some leaders saw them as the future of Israel, and they thought they deserved a lot of attention.

From the age of 13, children were considered to be of legal age. The Bar-mitzvah ("son of the law", in Hebrew) ceremony was performed as an important rite of passage from childhood to adulthood, after which they were considered members of society and should obey the law. Even today, Jews carry out this ceremony. But with the advances in matters of women's rights from the 20th century on, a ceremony for girls is also held.

Questions:

- What can we learn from those parents who brought their children to Jesus to bless them?
- In what ways can parents ask God to bless their children?

II. God teaches us through children

According to Matthew 19:13, parents approached the Lord Jesus with their children so that He would put His hands on them and bless them. At that moment, the disciples, "rebuked them" (v. 13b). This reaction of the disciples could have been for several reasons: the children of that region and of that time were different from the current ones (as already mentioned), for they were seen as reckless creatures. It could also be that the disciples, in their desire to protect the Lord Jesus, didn't want the children to interrupt him, or they supposed that they would distract the Master. For these reasons, the apostles, with an authoritarian attitude, prevented the children from approaching Him.

The disciples of the Lord Jesus had not understood the explanation that the Master had given them previously about children and the Kingdom (Matthew 18:3-4). On the contrary, they displayed a lack of discernment that led them to show a hostile attitude and an environment of aggression. But unlike them, Jesus provided a climate of affection and love for the boys and girls.

A. Jesus intercedes for the children (Matthew 19:14a)

Jesus said: "... Let the little children come to me and don't hinder them" (v. 14b). He wanted to give an opportunity for the children to be blessed. The Master's mandate was direct and precise. He pointed out that they had to be allowed to go to Him, and must not be stopped or interrupted as they approached Him.

Jesus, tenderly and lovingly, extended His arms to the children, and not only blessed them, but also protected their tender childish hearts. Today, many minors are emotionally destroyed and mistreated in many ways, or even assaulted. If we help them get closer to Jesus, they will receive forgiveness, healing, comfort, etc. Their hearts will be filled with hope again. Our Lord not only gives children much needed emotional help, but also, spiritual help. He promised to intercede for them (Hebrews 7:25).

B. Jesus includes the children (Matthew 19:14b)

Jesus considers children as a model for His Kingdom. On at least four other occasions, the book of Matthew speaks of children (Matthew 11:25, 18:2-3, 19:13, 21:16). In all of them, there is a guiding principle: the special place they occupy in the heart of God. We read that the Master revealed His mysteries to them, gave them the Kingdom, and perfected their praise. For Jesus, children were an example to adults because of their openness to him. As they sought Him out, they allowed themselves to be led by Him. They praised, respected, and listened to Him, as many children do today. Jesus had to rebuke the attitude of the Jews, especially that of the leaders of Israel, but he opened his heart to children. He provided, and continues to provide, a climate of affection for children. He doesn't marginalize them, He doesn't attack them, He doesn't cause them to suffer violence. He loves, accepts and blesses them.

Many of Jesus' teachings about the Kingdom have children as an example (Luke 18:15-17). Jesus taught that to be able to enter the Kingdom of God, we must be like children.

C. Characteristics of the child as models of kingdom greatness

This places a very different narrative at the center of our understanding of power as adults. Children, who generally have an attitude of service, aren't impressed by superior status or power. It's because of their simplicity and humility that Jesus makes them the models of greatness and power in His Kingdom. We're called to learn from the example of children about how to be bearers of God's power as we offer ourselves as servants of God.

In the Kingdom, all its citizens have childlike characteristics. In fact, without them we cannot even enter the Kingdom. We need to approach God as they do. Jesus' call to conversion, transformation, and change is clear. We cannot enter the Kingdom through our human endeavors.

Not only do we have to be like children, it's clear that Jesus includes the children in the mission. Not just because they are listeners, but also, as active participants.

Questions:

- In what ways might some Christian parents be preventing their children from meeting the Lord Jesus?
- Should believers pray for the children of their congregations and / or communities? Why?

III. Children today

Today, we also encounter people, events, and circumstances that distance boys and girls from the opportunity to be blessed by Jesus. We must be very careful when we're with them since through our actions or words, without realizing it, we may be taking away from them the chance to meet with the Lord.

Some of these impediments and attitudes of aggression that surround children are located in the spheres of family, school, society, government, church, etc. These same areas have created laws and guidelines to protect children, providing them rights and benefits. However, many times their rights have been violated. Today we observe that the rates of violence and aggressiveness towards minors have increased. Within the statistical tables, the most common are abortion, abandonment, drug use, discrimination, different forms of violence (psychological, sexual and verbal), etc.

In the face of this reality, Jesus's protection towards children is very opportune. The organization of the church must give support that helps to reduce the dangers that children face.

Questions:

- For what reason did our Lord present a child as a model of greatness in the kingdom of God?
- Why is the child a model of entry into the heavenly kingdom?

Conclusion

There is a great blessing in being like a child, for this attitude is the key that will allow us to enter the Kingdom of Heaven. Let's make a commitment to protect boys and girls through a ministry that provides accompaniment, protection and formation in order for them to grow integrally, into the fullness of Christ (Ephesians 4:13) because children are prepared to be part of the mission.



God's People Serve

Patricia Picavea (Argentina)

Passage to Study: Mark 10:35-45; Luke 22:24-27; John 13:13-17

Memory Verse: "Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you" John 13:14-15.

Lesson Aim: To see service as a lifestyle following Jesus' example.

Introduction

On one occasion, a girl, after being reprimanded by her teacher for talking a lot in class, approached her and the following dialogue was started: "When I grow up, I'm going to be a teacher," said the girl. "Really?" asked the teacher. "Yes" replied the girl, "I want to be like you." "That good! So, you will be able to teach other boys and girls," said the teacher. "No," replied the girl, "I want to be able to reprimand others like you do; and only I can speak in class."

Sometimes we want to be like someone else for the wrong reasons. As God's people, we must aspire to be like Jesus, and live according to His teachings. In order to reach this goal, we must see different aspects and teachings of His life. One of the important aspects of the Lord's life was service, and to be able to understand it better, we must examine the teaching that the Bible gives us on the subject.

Perhaps you have heard the following expression: "If we don't live to serve; we don't deserve to live". What a decisive statement! Is that what happens to those who don't know Christ? Is this what Christians are doing? Service is an important point in the life of the person who decides to follow Jesus ... a person who shows maturity and dedication.

Service in the Word of God is more than sporadic action. According to the Bible, to have a servant heart is crucial in the lives of those who want to be like Jesus Christ.

I. Service is a commandment for God's people (Mark 10:35-45; John 13:13-15)

The internet dictionary defines service as "the action of helping or doing work for someone." But what is service for a Christian? In Mark 10:35-45, we find two young disciples of the Lord Jesus who came to Him with one request. They wanted to sit one on

his right and the other on His left. At first glance, this seemed like a simple request, but these places were positions of maximum authority and privilege. Jesus said to them: "You don't know what you are asking," Jesus said, "Can you drink the cup I drink or be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with?" (Mark 10:38). They answered this question with an affirmation, but without understanding well what it meant. Therefore, Jesus explained to them that, although later they would go through what He was going to go through, those places would not be occupied by request (v. 40).

Finally, Jesus explained what His purpose was for coming into this world. In doing so, he indirectly clarified what their purpose should be as well. Jesus didn't come to be a king to be served and obeyed by everyone, but on the contrary, He came to serve (v. 45).

What does it mean to serve? According to Mark 10:45, it's as follows: "For even the Son of Man didn't come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." So, what does service entail? First of all, handing over. This is giving ourselves to another person, even we don't know if they will take advantage of it, if they will appreciate it, or if they will value it. Service is a complete action to our neighbor following Jesus' example, without measure or skimping, but only for the simple fact of wanting the best for the other person.

Second, it implies giving; that is, spending our strength and resources for another person without speculating or thinking: "Well, today I am doing this service for you, because tomorrow, you can get me out of trouble," or "I'm going to do this person a favor because when I have asked him before, he has always helped me." Jesus gave himself in service knowing that not all people would value what He was doing. Service implies putting yourself at the command of another person, to do what they want or need.

Thirdly, it involves sacrifice. Maybe it will mean sleeplessness, work and effort. If there's no sacrifice, there's no service. Service is doing what is best for others, it's working for another when he or she needs my service or help. Many times, this isn't easy. This sacrifice involves doing things that aren't to our liking, but which will benefit the one who receives the service. Jesus left us the best example of what service is by giving his life to save us (Galatians 1:4).

But in a world where selfishness and self-service prevail, it's difficult to see service in a disinterested way, and also as a priority. Therefore, service must be a distinctive characteristic of the faithful Christian.

In John 13:13-15, we see another example of service that Jesus left us. On that occasion, He washed the feet of his disciples, which was a task intended for the lowest servant in a house. It happened that once the Lord Jesus finished washing their feet, he said to his disciples: "You call me 'Teacher' and 'Lord,' and rightly so, for that is what I am. Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you."

When someone needs our service, we must remember these words of our Lord Jesus, and not make excuses or speculate about it. We need to understand this biblical passage in light of what we can do for others. This example of the Master doesn't literally mean that once a year, we must perform the rite of washing the feet of the brothers and sisters in the church. Rather, it shows us that we must be humble and serve others as a way of life, no matter who we're asked to serve.

In the new Kingdom that Jesus came to establish, there are laws (commandments) to keep. These days, people don't like to follow laws. They are constantly driving through red lights, not paying their taxes, bribing to obtain certain privileges, etc. Many times, they aren't caught. But in the kingdom of God, the fulfillment of the commandments is decisive. If we belong to this Kingdom, we must fulfill obey them. A commandment from God cannot be negotiated, nor does it have gray tones. Strictly, it is or it's not; it's met or not met. Hence, it's not correct to say: "He's a good Christian"; or he's "a bad Christian". One is a Christian, or one is not. What will make a person a Christian is his or her relationship with Christ, and the fulfillment or not of His commandments (John 14:15). When we obey God, we show others the love we have for God (John 13:14; Romans 13:10).

This commandment to serve is so important that from Jesus' perspective, it will be decisive at the time of judgment. In Matthew 25:31-46, Jesus states what will happen after His second coming. On that day, He will sit

on His throne of glory as judge, and He will be with His angels. Then all nations will be gathered, and the Lord will judge the world. He will put the sheep on the right, and on the left, the goats. The criterion for the which side we'll be on will be the service or help we have done for others. So, the Bible says: "...whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me!" (v. 40)

It's interesting to know that the Lord won't judge us by how famous or rich we are, or by how many degrees we have, but on the contrary, we'll be judged by the simple things that we did or didn't do in daily life, such as giving food to the hungry, water to the thirsty, a place to stay for the stranger, shelter to the needy, or whether we have visited the sick or the prisoners. This service, as we mentioned previously, must be disinterested; that is, we must not think of receiving something in return. However, we must remember that just doing good works won't get us to Heaven. It's a service for love of those who need it.

Questions:

- What is service for you?
- How did Jesus define service? (Mark 10:45; John 13:15).

II. Serving makes God's people Christlike (Luke 22:24-27)

John 13:15 says: "I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you." In all aspects of our lives, we must follow Christ's example, not that of our neighbor, friend or colleague. Many times, comparing ourselves to another person seems good, but they may be mediocre. If that is so, we feel better than them. When the person with whom we compare ourselves is a very good model, we get discouraged because we think it's impossible to be like them. In the end, we almost always find an excuse, and we feel that we're winning.

We should never make the mistake of measuring ourselves to others. We should never compare ourselves with what the pastor does or doesn't do, says or doesn't say, or with our brother, sisters, spouse or parents, etc. Our measure of comparison should always be Jesus.

The church is the medium God chose to perfect the saints so that "...we shall become mature people, reaching to the very height of Christ's full stature" (Ephesians 4:12-13). So, our goal is to be like Christ! But beware! It's not that we're going to be gods, but Christlike people, and when we serve we show this sort of maturity.

The disciples were men who at first didn't understand the dimensions of the Kingdom that Jesus was inaugurating. We see in Luke 22:24-27 that some of them were full of selfish ambition. The passage shows us another point that Jesus wanted to underscore. In the culture of His time, where slaves had to blindly serve their masters, and where being humble was debased, Jesus had to teach them about humility. Service and humility weren't valued. Showing humility was considered to be a weakness. A man's position in society was measured by his control, power, and influence over others. So, when the disciples saw Jesus, their Master, doing the humblest job of washing feet, that upset their convictions, and turned their value system upside down.

Washing visitors' feet was a courtesy rule. In those days, people walked great distances amid dust (in dry weather) and mud (in rainy weather). Upon entering the house they were going to, there was always a large container of water, and a servant or slave who was given the task of washing visitors' feet. Whoever did it was the least of the servants.

The disciples wanted to be great, but they never would have thought to do what Jesus did. Are we too unlike them today? Everyone (including some Christians) wants to be great. So, we see in John 13:13-14 that Jesus had to focus the lives of His disciples properly. If Jesus had asked one of His disciples to wash His feet, possibly more than one would have done it. Who could refuse to wash Jesus' feet? Possibly, many of us today would wash the feet of some authority or superior. But Jesus took the initiative and washed the feet of His disciples. By doing this he broke the idea that leaders don't serve, and humbled himself before His disciples. He said that we must do the same. This is the service that God expects of his people.

Questions:

- What are the characteristics of service, according to Luke 22:24-27?
- Is there any similarity between these characteristics of the times of Jesus and our time? Explain?

III. Serving blesses God's people (John 13:13-17)

The Greek word for 'blessed' is the same word that Jesus used in the Sermon on the Mount. But this is more than a word; well it's a concept. In the Greek world of

Jesus' time, the people lived with the belief that their gods enjoyed the ideal life or happy life. What was that about? They had abundant wealth, power, prestige and sexual freedom. When they wanted to refer to the lives of their gods, they did so with the word makarios. The island of Cyprus was considered by the Greeks as the best place to live. They called the island Makarios (happy), because it had everything a person could want to be happy: good weather, beautiful scenery, riches and attractions that its visitors could enjoy.

How similar the concept of happiness that the Greeks had with ours! Right? In this (Greek) world, our Lord Jesus came with a new concept of happiness. The happiness that Jesus referred to has to do with the character of the person. Being blessed has to do with something internal, it's the result of what one does. We could say: "Blessed (happy) are those who serve others; they will feel satisfied". Happiness has to do with BEING, rather than having. It doesn't matter what we have or don't have, we're happy for what we can be and do together with Christ.

In Mark 10:35-45, the problem was that the disciples wanted to be bigger or more important, but they didn't understand the conditions of Jesus' new Kingdom. For some people who want to excel, service is difficult because they aren't willing to serve, or feel that it's not on their level. Similarly, Jesus tells them that if they want to be the first, there is only one way: to serve. In other words, if you want to be blessed, there is only one way: obey the command to serve following the Master's example.

Questions:

- In this time that we live, what is the concept of happiness that people have?
- What is the concept of happiness for Jesus, according to John 13:15-17?

Conclusion

Take time in class to ask your students to discuss what the conclusion of this lesson could be for their lives, and how they plan to put it into practice. Then each one can write their conclusion on a piece of paper.



God's People are Christians

Elías Betanzos (Mexico)

Passages to Study: Romans 15:4; 2 Corinthians 5:18-19; Ephesians 4:3-6; 2 Timothy 3:15; 1 John 2:6

Memory Verse: "Whoever claims to live in him must live as Jesus did." 1 John 2:6

Lesson Aim: To understand what identifies us as true Christian people.

Introduction

Loss of identity is one of our current problems. Many people seek to affirm their identity with things like status, money, appearances, brands, or groups, etc. All this speaks to us of this problem, whose origin is in the sin committed by the first couple of humanity, Adam and Eve. When they sinned, they damaged their relationship not only with God, but also between themselves.

However, this serious problem of sin has a solution for all humanity. The antidote is Jesus. When we come to Him, things change radically. The apostle John spoke to us on this subject. He explained the difference between belonging or not belonging to God's people. From chapter one of the gospel that bears his name, John, the beloved disciple, showed us the difference of "being" or "not being" a child of God, which he later highlighted in his epistles.

In John 1:12, he wrote: "Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God." Here, John clearly used the verb to 'become' which implies identity and inclusion, unlike the negative form, which implies exclusion and indeterminacy. For this reason, it was important for John to speak of opposition: "They went out from us, but they didn't really belong to us. For if they had belonged to us, they would have remained with us; but their going showed that none of them belonged to us" (1 John 2:19)

So, one of the most important themes John focuses on is for us to understand our identity in knowing Jesus. This is how he expressed it in John 1:12: "Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God" where he spoke of 'receiving' the Lord Jesus. This means that we need to have a personal relationship with Him. We will also see that this relationship implies permanence with the Lord. Finally, our identity is defined by Jesus and will

help us walk as He walked, "Whoever claims to live in him must live as Jesus did" (1 John 2:6).

I. A people who know Jesus

The first decision we have to make is to get to know Jesus. In the Bible, the word "know" has to do with maintaining a relationship. For example, in the book of Genesis, we read the following: "Adam knew his wife Eve ..." (Genesis 4:1a). This shows a relationship, which in this case was intimate or sexual. In the original language of the New Testament, there are two words for "knowing". One is *ginosko*; and the other, *gnosis*. The second implies only intellectual knowledge, such as when we do research on the Internet, a type of information without experience. Instead, the first word has to do with relational knowledge. This means that when an experience is lived, knowledge remains. This is how the apostle John described it in his first letter: "That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched—this we proclaim concerning the Word of life" (1 John 1:1).

There is a difference between meeting a celebrity through the media, meeting your best friend, or meeting your spouse through living together. What Jesus wants us to have with him is a personal relationship where we see him at every moment, think about him, listen to him, etc. The reason is that when you and I relate to Jesus, we will actually see what He's like, and what is described in the Word of God.

John was one of the disciples who was able to embrace the Lord Jesus. The Bible says that he was sitting next to Jesus. "One of them, the disciple whom Jesus loved, was reclining next to him" (John 13:23). But more than that coexistence, it was that this apostle understood the character of Jesus to such a degree that he expressed the following:

“If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9). This tells us that this disciple understood Jesus’ love, His character, His integrity, His justice and His mercy.

Questions:

- What more do you think you need to know about the Lord Jesus?
- What attitudes have you learned from our Master?

II. A people that abide in Jesus

This foundation of abiding in God was taught by the apostle John from his gospel. Jesus said to his disciples: “Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. If you don’t remain in me, you are like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned. If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. This is to my Father’s glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples. As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. If you keep my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commands and remain in his love” (John 15:10). Using the metaphor of the vine and its branches, Jesus explained how that once we know Him, we must remain in Him. So, this question arises: how can we remain in God?

John saw the Master for three years. Today, physically, we don’t see Jesus; But he has left us his Word and prayer, two practices that we must take seriously if we want to live out our identity as Christians. Many would think of just praying, and others, just by reading and studying the Word. However, it’s a relationship of intimacy where Jesus speaks to us, and we listen, ask questions and He answers us. That is, read and pray, pray and read, speak and listen, listen and speak. Why is this relationship so important? Because through it, we get to know Christ and remain in Him.

When we’re part of a group or in a relationship, we learn the words, tastes, intentions and vocabulary of the group or the person with whom we share time. So, our identity is shaped by their influence. If it’s a group that talks about indecent things, we’ll soon be talking about indecent things too. If it’s a group like the church, soon we’ll be saying “amen” to affirm everything, or we will say ‘brother’ or ‘sister’ to every person we come

across. Therefore, our identity can be affected by our interpersonal relationships.

If we’re constant in our relationship to the Lord Jesus, we’ll become more and more like Him, and our identity will be shaped by Him. The apostle John wrote it this way: “If you keep my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commands and remain in his love” (John 15:10). Remaining implies obedience. But to obey, we need two elements: knowing the commandments (reading the Scripture) and living according to those commandments. So, when we say that we believe in Jesus, basically, we’re saying: “I am willing to live my life according to what He wants.”

John wrote the following in one of his later letters: “This is how we know who the children of God are and who the children of the devil are: Anyone who doesn’t do what is right isn’t God’s child, nor is anyone who doesn’t love their brother and sister” (1 John 3:10). What John tells us in this passage is that one of the aspects that helps us remain near to God involves loving our brothers and sisters, and this, in turn, will affirm our identity as children of the Lord. This is very strong.

Imagine your parents one day saying to you, “You are not my child.” Such a statement would possibly destroy us, tear us apart, and destroy our self-esteem, security, and identity. On the other hand, when a father is honored by his son, he’ll simply say: “That is my son”, which will strengthen his self-esteem, affirm him, give him security, identity, and reaffirm who he is as a person and what he can achieve. The apostle John was very clear; there’s a way to know whether or not we’re a child of God, that is, whether or not we’re part of His people.

Questions:

- What do you think you must do to stay near to Jesus?
- Do you think that something is separating you from the Master?

III. A people who walk as Jesus walked

Now we understand that knowing Jesus means having a personal relationship with Him, as if He were our brother, our friend, or a person with whom we can relate. It’s necessary to cultivate that relationship by reading the Bible and praying. But a person can be a biblical scholar, and not treat his neighbor well. We can pray a lot, and suffer from spiritual pride, which is something that happened from the beginning of Christianity. Walking like Jesus means loving like Him, speaking like Him and treating others in the same way that He treats us.

The apostle John tells us that this is very important for our identity as Christians. He wrote: “No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us” (1 John 4:12). This is what we should aim for in everything we do. We need to put into practice the love of God.

What John teaches is that loving God includes loving our neighbor, a very necessary aspect, because love covers all faults. Proverbs 10:12 says: “Hatred stirs up conflict, but love covers over all wrongs.”

Ask your students:

1. What do we do when someone is in need?
2. What attitude do we take when people fail us?
3. How do we treat people when their day isn't going well?

These are circumstances that we face every day. Our Lord Jesus, when He saw those in need, had compassion on them (Matthew 9:36). He fed them, healed them, and always loved them. Even after the disciples had failed, He went in search of them. He loved them and fed them. “Jesus said to them, ‘Come and have breakfast.’” None of the disciples dared ask him, “Who are you?” They knew it was the Lord” (John 21:12).

To be forgiving is a characteristic of being like our Master, and of walking as He walked. Jesus treated the people who were discriminated against uniquely. He treated the Samaritan woman, publicans and sinners, and even the teachers of the law, well with love and mercy. This is the attitude that we must take day by day.

Questions:

- What aspects of your life have changed since you met Jesus?
- In what ways do you think you need to be more like the Lord?

Conclusion

Our identity lies in the fact that we're children of God. As such, we belong to Him. We depend on our beloved Father and we're continually learning. Our character must be like that of Christ. He wants to continue doing His perfecting work in our lives. For this, we need to live humbly. When we read the Gospels, we can see how the Lord treated people; and He continues treating them with love. How do we treat people, our spouse, our children, our siblings, our parents, etc. Keep in mind that love is the believer's hallmark.



God's People are Holy People

Loysbel Pérez Salazar (Cuba)

Passages to Study: Mark 12:30-33; Acts 1:8; 2 Corinthians 5:14-21; Galatians 5:25; Philippians 2:1-2

Memory Verse: “‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.’ The second is this: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no commandment greater than these” Mark 12:30-31.

Lesson Aim: To learn about holiness and allow this knowledge to help us live it out daily.

Introduction

What is the first thing that comes to your mind when you hear about holiness? Some, perhaps, have heard so much about this subject in sermons, classes, counseling, books, formal studies in seminars, family spiritual times, etc. that their ears are sometimes saturated with so much information about the same thing. So, some will say: ‘I already know about that’ or ‘I know what God wants me to do, nobody has to repeat it to me so many times.’ But we may have a lot of information without understanding it correctly or how to apply it in our lives.

It’s unlikely that we don’t know what sort of life pleases God. In fact, God Himself wrote His law on our hearts (Hebrews 10:16). But it’s not about how much we know, but how we live based on that knowledge. Hence, this lesson will give us guidelines to help us live out holiness day by day.

I. We’re a holy people because God loves us (Acts 1:8; 2 Corinthians 5:14-21; Galatians 5:25)

Love is the central axis of holiness. God loved us so much that He was able to give up His own son to die for us (1 John 4:10). Our holiness is born from His love; therefore, we can affirm that love is at the heart of holiness.

A. He reconciled us

Paul was clear in 2 Corinthians 5:14-21 by stating:

1. Christ died for everyone; and we have all died to our old life (v. 14).
2. Those who receive the new life of Christ don’t live for themselves but for Him (v. 15).
3. Everyone who belongs to Christ has become a new person. Their old ways have been transformed (vs. 16-17).
4. All God’s work on our behalf is a gift (v. 18).
5. We’re given the task of helping other people to be reconciled to the Lord (vs. 18b-20).

6. Christ made it possible for us to have a correct relationship with God by offering himself for our sin (v. 21).

Holiness is the fruit of God’s love. No person can become holy without making Christ’s redemptive work their own. Holiness has to do with something that God has already done for us (Jesus’ atoning death). If we don’t appropriate this redemptive work, it’s impossible to live in holiness.

It’s through His cross that the believer receives the power to begin to live differently. That’s why every person, when they have an encounter with Christ, experiences reconciliation with God. We become someone different, and everything changes.

This is the mystery of an internal experience that’s reflected in how we live. We abandon everything that belonged to the world of darkness, which is contrary to God, not because someone has convinced us, but by the deep work of the Holy Spirit carried out in our innermost being. That experience produces a resounding ‘no’ to sin, and a start in the path of life that pleases God.

It may be that in our congregations we have people on the membership lists, or folks who for many years have attended church services, but they haven’t lived the experience of reconciliation with God, and they haven’t really given their lives to Him. What they do and live is motivated by some teaching they have been given which they try to follow by repeating the rules they observe in the faith community, and this makes them seem to be real Christians. But they lack the sanctifying experience of God, the full experience of communion with Him. They appear to be fine within the meeting places of the church, or when leaders, pastors, or other members of their congregation are present, however when they are alone or in their home setting, they are another kind of person.

If we want to live in holiness for God, we have to know the God who allows this experience. Otherwise, we will continue to follow rules and commandments, but will feel dry inside our spirits. The time will come when we won't be satisfied and won't be able to continue living without His Spirit. Christians are meant to live their lives expressing holiness based on the love of God and His eternal purpose. God continues to make it possible for all who surrender their wills to Him. It's in the context of His grace that the power to live in holiness is received.

B. He fills us with His Holy Spirit.

The love of God is palpable in the lives of believers who have really put Him first in their lives. The life of holiness must show that God comes first.

God's love made it possible for sinful man to be reconciled to God (God's first work of grace). He can also guarantee that our life is kept in grace, and that is where being filled with the Holy Spirit is essential for the holy life of every believer (Ephesians 5:18-20). This experience gives the necessary power to manifest fruit, and live in the way that pleases God. No one can give what they don't have. For this reason, for our life to manifest love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faith, gentleness and temperance (Galatians 5:22-23), we need the Lord to produce it within us.

We must understand that the life of holiness doesn't start with us, but with what the Holy Spirit is doing within us. We have welcomed Him, and are obedient as He reveals in us this glorious process of sanctification. He's taking charge of shaping our whole life to such an extent that we won't be the same. We're daily being transformed into the image of Christ through the presence of the Holy Spirit in us. He's building the character of the Lord in our lives (2 Corinthians 3:18). All this happens when we put ourselves in His hands, and we prepare ourselves for God to work in us.

When the Spirit's transforming work is active within us, we realize that what we used to do without internal reproof has changed since now there is an inner voice speaking and guiding us. It hurts Him when we do what we used to do before; we realize that for God it was sinful. People around us will begin to notice changes in our lives. For example, many will observe that we no longer get angry easily, no longer steal, or tell lies, and we have stopped participating in sinful vices, etc. The Holy Spirit is making us a new people who belong to Christ. We have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires (Galatians 5:24-25).

This experience gives us enough power to live the holy life. If until that moment, alcohol, drugs, lies and other sins defeated us, after this experience of being filled with the Holy Spirit, we will no longer feel the internal desire to yield to sin that for a long time had dominated us.

It's clear that no person can live in holiness without the impact of God's reconciling work and the filling of His Spirit. The life of holiness, which we live and experience, has its foundation in the love of God and His eternal purpose, for all who surrender their wills to Him. It's in the context of His grace that the power to live in holiness is received. We have the power to not sin, to not surrender to the purposes of the flesh or whatever the devil offers, but to live a holy life.

Questions:

- Name at least three fundamental truths that the apostle Paul described in 2 Corinthians 5:14-21.
- Why do we need to be filled with the Spirit as believers?

II. A holy people because we love God and our neighbors (Mark 12:30-33; Philippians 2:1-2)

These commandments that Jesus mentioned in Mark 12:30-33 were already known by the Jewish people centuries ago (the *shema* of Israel in Deuteronomy 6:4-5, and also in Leviticus 19:18). But the new thing that Jesus did was bring these two commandments together. As William Barclay comments: "No rabbi had ever done it before" (Commentary on the New Testament. Spain: Editorial CLIE, 1995, p.194). Jesus gave these commandments the highest importance, hence their relevance for the church.

Our reaction to what God has done produces the action of loving Him and our neighbor (Mark 12:30-33). This is the clearest experience and evidence of a life of holiness. Those words of the Master focus on what each child of God should do, and how they should live.

A. Holiness means loving God with everything we have (Mark 12:30)

Jesus said that we should love God with all our being because we love Him. This is what living in holiness means. We must love with all our hearts, souls, minds and all our strength, giving ourselves wholly to Him. We're not called to follow rules, commandments, or dogmas of men, but to please God by fulfilling what he wants us to be and do, as described in His Word. Everything that God calls sin results in negative consequences for our own lives.

The 'how' we respond to God's love helps us live in holiness. Every believer must consider that they are part of the Lamb's bride, the church (Rev. 19:7), and because of that, God doesn't want us to live in sin. He'll help us to be holy. It implies an intimate relationship, and not condemnation. Some believers believe that God is continually condemning them. For this reason, they have repressed carnal desires, are insecure, and are imprisoned internally, but God wants us to delight in keeping His laws (Psalm 1). The highlight of a life of holiness is when obedience to divine law ceases to be burdensome and becomes natural and joyful.

We follow and obey because God loved us and we love God with all our hearts, with all our souls, with all our minds and strength. We need to get to know God, not with the intellect, but through a personal experience with Him as a divine person,

The love of God is palpable in the believers' lives who really have put Him first in their lives. The life of holiness of a believer must show that God comes first:

- The time of intimacy with the Lord is inviolable. It's more important than anything else we have to do in the day. Life must revolve daily around speaking and listening to the voice of the heavenly Father, living by faith and by His promises.
- Our fulfillment in His Kingdom stops at nothing. We have a divine task of winning and discipling people, investing our lives in others and teaching them to live like Christ. Our love for God translates into being like Christ.

B. Holiness is reflected by loving people (Mark 12:31; Philippians 2:1-2)

Love for others is a fundamental part of being like Christ; it's an essential aspect of a life of holiness. When Jesus said: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Mark 12:31), He included the Gentiles as well. This concept of love illustrated the character of the Kingdom that He had come to bring, in contrast to Jewish thought. Holiness means loving everyone, even our enemies (Matthew 5:43-44).

Today, people want to see Christ reflected in the life of every believer. They aren't usually interested in how much we know about God, theology, doctrine, or how good we are at praising Him. They want to see us 'walk the talk', to see us show in our lives what we believe. People need to be impacted by the love of God. They need Christians who love them sincerely. More than words, the world wants to see testimonies of transformed lives that show the Lord. Holiness isn't just about knowing with our heads but about giving evidence in our lives.

God is very interested in the relationships that His created creatures have with each other. For God, a strong way of knowing we're living in holiness is seeing the way we relate to our neighbors. The apostle Paul gave various spiritual laws that must be present in the lives of the saints; and all of these have an impact on our relationships (Ephesians 4:17-32).

The New Testament places a marked interest in love for others as part of the life of holiness (Matthew 5:23-24). If we go to church meetings, are involved in ministries, are leaders, pastors, etc., our service and worship won't be received by God if we don't fix the pending relationship problems that we have with someone. God's command is that we leave everything at the altar and reconcile with

that person. Nothing we give to God is of value if this doesn't happen. Love, as the central axis of the life of holiness, includes forgiveness and reconciliation between human beings.

Paul referred to the essentials of the life of holiness, and focuses more on the relationship between believers. In these passages we're told to:

1. Learn to agree with each other from the heart. Because we love our brother and sisters, we won't be in fights, arguments or strife; rather we will seek to resolve differences in peace.
2. Love each other. Love among brothers and sisters is a central commandment in the New Testament. Our love must be positive constructive love that doesn't seek to do harm to anyone. (Romans 13:10). There's no point in preaching, ministry, Christian works, etc. if there is gossip or backbiting in the church. Since we love people, we're going to give them a word of blessing, we're going to correct them, we're going to meekly warn them of evil, we're going to help them grow in faith, we're going to offer our shoulders for them to cry on, and we will comfort those who are hurting or grieving. I Corinthians 13 shows what it looks like when believers love each other.
3. We need to be united in purpose. Philippians 2:2 says: "...having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind." Love makes it possible for us to work with another person without obstacles or barriers. The most important thing is why we're doing the task. The apostle John also spoke on this topic (I John 3:14-15 and I John 3:16-18).

Questions:

- What is implied in loving God wholeheartedly?
- What does it mean to love ourselves?
- What evidences can be seen in your life as a reflection of your life of holiness?
- In what way can love of neighbor be evidenced; in your daily life?

Conclusion

Holiness has its maximum expression in love. God's Holy Spirit wants to fill us with this spirit of love. If we love God and our neighbor as ourselves, and walk in a close intimate relationship with our Lord, we will live holy lives, and by our loving actions, we will show the world what God is like.



God's People are a Missional People

Macario Balcázar (Peru)

Passages to Study: Matthew 28:16-20; Mark 16:14-20; Luke 24:45-48; John 17:20-26, 20:30-31, 21:15-17

Memory Verse: “But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light” 1 Peter 2:9.

Lesson Aim: To value the importance of the mission that we have as God’s people in this world.

Introduction

We’re a missional people. This implies that as a church, we’re aware of a very important work that we have to do. In this lesson, we’ll try to understand what that task or mission is based on what the blessed Word of God tells us.

A complete understanding of our being as a missionary people cannot avoid at least two passages in the Old Testament that are related to what God wanted the people of Israel to be. These biblical passages are as follows:

Exodus 19:5-6 highlights the following:

- Command to God’s people to obey and keep the covenant of the Lord.
- God saw or considered his people as his special treasure.
- The mission of God’s people is to be a kingdom of priests; that is, mediators and intercessors.
- God’s people, which is His special treasure, are to be a holy people, called by God to reflect what He’s like.

Isaiah 49:6 introduces us to Israel as the servant of God, called to bring salvation to humanity. This is also affirmed in Isaiah 49:3. When interpreting this verse, we apply it as a symbol that points to our blessed Savior, Jesus, but we can also affirm that it’s a text that indicates the Great Commission given by the Lord in the texts of the New Testament. First of all, the Jews were God’s missionary people, and then after Pentecost, God commissions us to go out to all nations.

I. Jesus Commissioned his disciples

Jesus gave a missionary mandate to His disciples. Each gospel presents this Great Commission in a slightly different format. Next, we’ll look at how the gospels approach this theme.

A. The Great Commission according to Matthew (Matthew 28:16-20)

Matthew, whose name means “gift of God”, presents Jesus as the promised Messiah to the people of Israel. This commission has the following features:

- It was given in Galilee to the eleven apostles, on a mountain previously chosen by Jesus (v.16).
- It was given in a context when the disciples were worshipping Jesus (v. 17).
- Jesus declared to his eleven disciples that He had all power in heaven and on earth. With this, He was declaring that there is no other above Him; and that everything was under his control.
- The Lord commanded the disciples to go and make disciples of all nations (v. 19). No nation, tribe or language was to be excluded.
- Jesus instructed them to baptize the new disciples in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit (v. 19). This is the famous baptismal formula that we Christians use every time we baptize a new believer in the faith.
- Likewise, the Lord commanded them to teach new disciples all the things that He had taught them (v. 20).
- Finally, He promised them that He would be with them every day, until the end of the world (v. 20). That promise is also for the disciples of all time.

B. The great commission according to Mark (Mark 16:14-20) (Note: The most reliable early manuscripts and other ancient witnesses do not have Mark 16:9-20.)

Mark, whose name means ‘Great Hammer’ in Latin, wrote this gospel and addressed it to Gentiles, that is, to the people who didn’t belong to the people of Israel.

Mark 16:14-20 show the following regarding the mission that Christ entrusted to his apostles:

1. Jesus appeared to his eleven apostles; and reproached them for their hardness of heart and disbelief about his resurrection (v. 14).
2. He ordered them to go all over the world and preach the gospel to all people (v. 15).
3. He promised them that whoever believed (the gospel) and was baptized would be saved. But he also claimed that those who don't believe will be condemned (v. 16).
4. He spoke to them of five signs that would follow those who believed in Him (vs. 17-18): They would cast out the demons in His name; they would speak new languages; they would take up snakes in their hands without being damaged; they would drink deadly things that would not harm them; and they would lay their hands on the sick to heal them.

C. The Great Commission according to Luke (Luke 24:45-48)

Luke was a gentile doctor and companion of the apostle Paul. We can find the following aspects in Luke 24:45-48:

1. Through a masterful explanation, the Lord Jesus opened the understanding of the eleven apostles so that they could understand everything the prophets said about the Messiah relating to Him (v. 45). Imagine the Lord giving His last class to His apostles.
2. Through this class, the Master helped the disciples understand that all His sufferings, death and resurrection had been necessary for the salvation of humanity (v. 46).
3. He also explained to them that it was necessary to teach repentance and forgiveness of sins to all nations, beginning in Jerusalem (v. 47).
4. Jesus clearly pointed out to His disciples that they were witnesses of everything that had happened to Him (v. 48, Acts 1:8). The word 'witness' comes from the Greek *martur* which implies being eyewitnesses, being willing to share everything known, seen and heard about some person or event. We get the word martyr from this Greek word which implied loss of life for a cause. The Lord was telling them that they must be willing to testify of Him, even to die for it.
5. They needed to wait in Jerusalem until they received the promise of the Father, the power to testify (v. 49).

D. The Great Commission according to John (John 17:20-26, 20:30-31, 21:15-17)

John, whose name means 'God has been gracious' wrote the fourth gospel. It's not easy to find in the gospel

a Great Commission given to His disciples after the resurrection. However, there are some passages that are relevant:

1. In John 20:21 we find Jesus commissioning them. He said: "Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you."
2. In John 17:20-26, Jesus prayed not only for His disciples who were already with him, but for those who were to believe in Him through their word. In that prayer, He emphasized the unity that should be among His disciples, in those who already were and in those who would be later. From this passage, we can infer that the mission of the disciples was to win others and seek their unity with Christ and with each other, so that they become like Christ.
3. John 20:30-31 speaks of the reason why the apostle John wrote his gospel, which was that people would believe in Jesus the Redeemer, and by believing, they may have life in His name. This shows the purpose of the church's mission, which is to preach the gospel so that people believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and in this way, have eternal life.
4. In John 21:15-17, we find the charge that the Lord Jesus gave Peter after forgiving him because he had denied Him. Three times He told Peter to take care of His lambs and sheep. In this passage, the term feed is used two times and shepherd, once. Both terms are synonymous; and they refer to the care that Peter and the other apostles had to carry out, that is, to feed, care for, and shepherd people who believed in Jesus.

Questions:

- What do you take from each evangelist in relation to the Great Commission? (Matthew 28:16-20; Mark 16:14-20; Luke 24:45-48; John 17:20-26, 20:30-31, 21:15-17) Why?
- Based on what has been studied in this lesson, try to summarize what Jesus entrusted to his apostles.

II. The Great Commission in the epistles of Peter and Paul

These two great missionaries communicated their call with the new churches in different towns and cities:

A. The apostle Paul

In Acts 26:16-18, we can see:

- a. God called Paul to be His minister and to be a witness of all that Christ would show him (v. 16).
- b. He sent him as his minister and witness to the Gentiles (v. 17).
- c. Paul had to help people open their eyes (v. 18).

In Romans 1:1,14-16, Paul emphasized the following:

- a. He had been called to be an apostle, set apart for the proclamation of the gospel of God (v. 1).
- b. He shared his message to wise and unwise, to Greeks and non Greeks. His task was to preach the gospel (v. 14).
- c. He wasn't ashamed of the gospel (v. 16).

The church too has to follow the same mission today. There are many other passages in the Pauline writings that speak of the mission. 1 Corinthians 9:16-17 is worth studying.

B. The apostle Peter

Regarding what Peter wrote in his first letter (1 Peter 2:9-10), five basic truths follow:

1. The quality of God's people. All believers are a chosen lineage, without distinction of race, nation, culture, language or personality. If Christ is in us, we're a special people.
2. We're a royal priesthood. That is, we're 'priests' who can freely approach our God, and at the same time, intercede on behalf of our brothers and sisters and of all humanity.
3. We're a holy nation. We share a holy culture, language, purposes, objectives and goals. Our purpose is also totally holy. We're in the world but we don't belong to this world, but rather to God's Holy Kingdom. God's people, His church, cannot and shouldn't be contaminated with the mundane worldly attitudes and pursuits.
4. We're God's property. He bought us with His own life, and we decided to receive Him as our Lord. So, we no longer belong to ourselves and we cannot live just as we like because God is the Lord of our lives. Before we were nothing, but now, by the mercy of God, we are a very special people, a treasure in His hands.
5. God's people live to announce the gospel, sharing the virtues of our blessed Savior, Jesus Christ, for whom we live, for whom we will live, and with whom we will be in Heaven.

C. A Summary of Mission in the Bible

We will try to summarize the mission of God's people as follows:

1. God raised up the people of Israel to be His special people, His treasure to be a light to illuminate the world as the faithful priests of God
2. Christ Jesus, the Son of God, the second person of the Trinity, became incarnate, and came into the world to be light and true salvation. He fulfilled this fully, sealing it with His death for the

sins of all humanity, and raising from the dead so that all who believe in Him can be saved and have eternal life.

3. Our blessed Savior chose twelve apostles to continue the work that He began, to communicate the message and mission to all the new disciples. This is how the church grew in the first century church, and how it's continued up to the present. The Christian church has fulfilled the mission of preaching the gospel and making disciples, but we need to recognize that there have been many failures and omissions.
4. God raised up a people and sent them to fulfill the Great Commission. Ask your students: Are we doing it as God wants?

Questions:

- Summarize in your own words what Paul said about the commission entrusted to him (Acts 26:16-18; Romans 1:1,14-16).
- How would you apply what 1 Peter 2:9-10 says to your own life?

III. God's people assume the Great Commission

Today as the Lord's church, there are three actions that we can do to make that mission come true:

1. Live holy as God's chosen people and be witnesses of Christ at all times and places, praising God as our first priority.
2. Make our life and all that we are available to God so that He uses us as He wishes. This implies carrying out the mission, starting from our church and going as far as God chooses to send us.
3. Contribute with our money, not only with our tithes and offerings, but with donations, inheritances, service and, especially, with our missionary offerings, through which we try to support all those people who God calls to work for God in different countries and contexts.

Questions:

- How can you take on the mandate of the Great Commission today?
- What do you consider you're doing in a practical way to fulfill the mission that Jesus Christ left us?

Conclusion

God has always called His disciples to fulfill the most important mission of all, the salvation of all human beings. He wants them to be freed from their sins, and become His children and heirs of eternal life. Our mission as a people of God is to be faithful to divine mandates and not fail the Lord at any time or place. Israel failed by not fulfilling her mission faithfully. We must do better. May God help us!



God's People Share the Good News

David Balcázar (Peru)

Passages to Study: Matthew 28:16-20; Luke 24:44-49; Acts 1:6-9

Memory Verse: “Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely, I am with you always, to the very end of the age” Matthew 28:19-20.

Lesson Aim: To learn that as God's people, we must share the Good News and feel a deep passion for people who don't know Christ.

Introduction

Have you ever wondered why we're not immediately taken to Heaven to be always with Christ when we receive Him? This is a good question for which there may be two answers:

1. Because the Lord wants us to worship him here, on earth. While there is life here and the final judgment has not come, the Lord wants His creation and humanity to worship him. The people who worship Him must be a holy people.
2. Because the Lord wants us to reach out to other people with the gospel so that they may be saved (1 Peter 2:9; 2 Peter 3:9), have abundant life, and also worship Him. While there is life on Earth, people are needed to share Christ and His salvation with other human beings who haven't yet experienced this grace.

This lesson treats the second reason; the work that the Lord wants His children to develop so that other people also might know him and experience the power of the gospel. We call this task of sharing the Good News (Gospel) “evangelizing,” and that's what our lesson for today is about.

I. Our Lord's last words

If we knew that we only had a few minutes to live, and we could give our loved ones one last message, what would we tell them? Surely, we would choose carefully what we would express; we would strive to convey the most important message we would like those we love most to remember.

Now, have you thought about what our Lord's last words were, according to the gospel records? When we analyze them in the different books written by the evangelists, we find important similarities that should make us think seriously about what the Lord wanted us to remember always, something which was very

important for Him. Let's review this message that Jesus left before going home to His father.

The last words of our Lord are to be found in the following passages: Matthew 28:19-20; Luke 24:46-47. Jesus was clearly indicating a very deep interest in the fact that we need to share the Good News of salvation. The book of Acts, also written by Luke, records the following words of the Master before his ascension: “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8).

So, in the Synoptic Gospels and Acts, the last recorded words of Jesus were about the mission that He left to us, His disciples, while we're here on Earth. This charge is to make disciples of the Lord.

We can imagine people asking the disciples after the ascension: “What was the last thing the Lord said before going to heaven? What did He want us to always remember?” They would most likely have answered what we have read above: “Our Lord commissioned us to make disciples; and this begins with the task of sharing the Good News”.

Think about this: Doesn't it make you think, realizing that the first four books of the New Testament are called “gospels”; that their writers are called “evangelists”; and that the Lord and these four witnesses have emphasized the need to go and preach the gospel? What do you think about it?

Questions:

- What do the last words of our Lord recorded in the synoptic gospel refer to (Matthew 28:19-20; Luke 24:46-47)?
- Do you feel that you're fulfilling this desire of the Lord in your Christian life? Comment.

II. The Great Commission or the “Great Omission”? (Matthew 28:18-20)

A. Establishing a necessary contrast

Many know Matthew 28:19-20 by heart, but the honest question is this, do we really put it into practice? Do we live it. Based on the possible answers to these questions, we could say that there are three types of Christians:

1. Those who congregate in a church sit down and listen to the message, and then they go back to their daily life. However, they don't share the Good News with other people, or do so very occasionally.
2. Those who gather their friends and neighbors together and speak to them about Christ. When someone says the prayer of faith, they consider that they have already fulfilled the mission that Jesus left us.
3. Those who gather their friends together, speak of Christ and then disciple them and fulfill the Great Commission.

Before looking a little more closely at the Great Commission, consider the difference in meaning between two words that are distinguished by just one letter: “Commission” and “Omission.” The Internet Dictionary defines commission as: “an instruction, command, or duty given to a person or group of people.” Omission is defined as: “someone or something that has been left out or excluded” (www.google search).

Generally, we know this passage from Matthew 28 as the Great Commission; but in practice, for some believers, or perhaps for many, it's the “Great Omission”. So, this unavoidable question arises: what about us?

B. A Brief Analysis of the Great Commission

The Great Commission (Matthew 28:19-20) consists of this:

1. “Therefore go ...” This is a mandate. What is clear is that we won't fulfill the Great Commission if we wait for people to come to us. We have to go to them.
2. “...and make disciples...” We find here that it's not only about sharing the Good News, we're called to make Jesus' disciples of people. This should be more than just helping people pray. It's a process that helps people affirm their faith in Christ and learn to follow Him with all their heart.
3. “...of all nations...” We shouldn't only make disciples of our friends and family or those close to us, but we have such responsibility to all peoples of different races, color, those who live in the next block, those who live ten blocks away, those who are in jail, in hospitals, and those who behave like our enemies, etc. Everybody.

4. “...baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.” Now we can see clearly that it's not just helping people say their first prayer of faith. We need to help them take the step of faith to enter or receive the waters of baptism. For this, it will be necessary to accompany new believers in a discipleship process until they reach this sacrament. Some believers believe that if they can get a person to pray a prayer of faith, they have already fulfilled the Great Commission. However, this isn't enough! We need to help new converts reach the waters of baptism in the name of our triune God.
5. “...teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.” It's not only leading them until they are baptized; we need to continue teaching new Christians to obey everything that Jesus commanded. This is more than pre-baptismal discipleship! We need to understand the broad and necessary task that our Lord Jesus entrusted to us with so much love and compassion for humanity.

At the end of verse 20, the Lord said: “...surely, I am with you always, to the very end of the age.” In verse 18, He also states that all power had been given to him in heaven and on earth. This teaches us that while we fulfill the Great Commission, the Lord will accompany us with His power and with wonders worthy of His name. This is also seen in the context of Jesus' closing words in Mark 16, Luke 24 and Acts 1. The power of Jesus, of the Holy Spirit, will be in us as we continue to spread the gospel, as we continue to evangelize and disciple.

Ask your students: How are you fulfilling the Great Commission? Are you involved in the Great Commission, or the 'Great Omission'? How many people have you shared the Good News with? How many have you discipled? How many did you help take the step of baptism? And have you been helping new Christians obey everything that Jesus commanded?

Questions:

- What is the difference between 'commission' and 'omission'?
- What is the Great Commission really about?

III. A practical method of Sharing the Good News

After reflecting on the importance of sharing the gospel of Christ, let's consider a brief method of how to effectively present the gospel, as an initial part of the fulfillment of the Great Commission. But first we need to consider some details.

First, no method by itself can convince and transform people's lives, this occurs by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Second, the Lord Jesus told His disciples not to leave Jerusalem but to wait for the promise of the Father (Acts 1:4). That promise was the Spirit Holy. Likewise, in John 16:8, Jesus said referring to the Holy Spirit: "When he comes, he'll prove the world to be in the wrong about sin and righteousness and judgment." Without Him, no method we use will help us fulfill the Lord's purpose.

We share here a method in four parts which can help us to share the Good News of Jesus with those who don't yet know Him as their Lord and Savior:

A. God created everything, including human beings, because he loves us

Genesis 1:1 states that God created everything we see. Genesis 1:27 says that God created man and woman in His image. Everything that we can see didn't arise by chance or without an ultimate cause because God is the initiator of all creation, just as a chair or a computer don't just happen by chance, but was made by some clever person to resolve a human problem. So too, everything we see isn't the product of random stages, but reflects that the wonderful mind of our God is behind all nature we see and it was created perfect.

The same God who created man and woman put them in the paradise of Eden, where He had a close and special relationship with them. Genesis 3:8 shows us that God "... walked in the garden."

B. Sin spoiled our relationship with God and with creation

Genesis 3 shows us that the humans were tempted, yielded, and sinned, and as a result, they separated themselves from having communion with God. They were expelled from paradise, and since then, mankind has lived in a state of separation from God.

We're all born in that state. This is why the Bible says in Romans 3:23 that we have all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. In other words, we have been separated from Him. We weren't only born with sin which we inherited, but we have also sinned for ourselves (Romans 3:10). We all sin and because of this, the punishment is death (Romans 6:23).

C. The solution to sin is Christ

Although sin separated us from God, He gave us a solution. Christ can deliver us from the condemnation of sin. Romans 6:23 tells us that God's gift is eternal life through Jesus. His death on the cross for our sins and His resurrection frees us from eternal death.

The Lord Jesus took our sins, died for us, took our place and received the punishment that each of us deserved, because of his great love (Isaiah 53:5; Romans 5:8). By His sacrificial act, we can now have new life and be adopted as children of God. Many people claim that they're all children of God, but that isn't what the Bible says.

In John 8:44, the Lord told the Jews that they didn't believe in Him, that they were children of the devil, and that they followed the devil's desires. Many are now children of the devil, and act like their father the devil, but we can be made children of God when we accept Christ as our Savior, and believe in His name (John 1:12).

D. The decision to accept Christ

God has already done everything for us so that we can be forgiven of our sins and receive salvation and eternal life. But although Christ died for all people, this doesn't mean that all are automatically saved. Each one must decide for themselves to receive Christ as their Savior. Each person must repent of all their sins, asking God for forgiveness, and accepting the sacrifice of Christ in their place (Revelation 3:20).

In this part, the person who is being evangelized, must be told to open the door of their hearts to the Lord and allow Him to come into their life, by the Holy Spirit, as their Lord and King, repenting of their sins. God will forgive all their wickedness, make them His son or daughter, and completely change their lives.

When counselling we can ask them: "Do you want to receive Christ as your Savior?" If the answer is affirmative, we need to help them repeat a sincere prayer of faith like this: "Lord Jesus, I acknowledge that I am a sinful person; I have done many wrong things. Today, I sincerely regret all of this. I ask you to forgive me and enter into my heart through your Holy Spirit. Make me your child because you love me. Amen". This prayer is just one example of how to help a person pray, guiding them in their decision to receive Jesus Christ as their Savior.

After the previous decision, remember that the fulfillment of the Great Commission doesn't end there. The new believer must now be discipled, baptized, and continue to learn all that Jesus taught.

Questions:

- What is required for an evangelistic method to be really effective in the salvation of people?
- Name the four parts of the plan of salvation suggested in the content of the lesson according to Genesis 1, 3; Romans 3:23, 6:23 and Revelation 3:20.

Conclusion

The last words of our Lord, what He specially wanted us to remember, was that we share the Good News with those who don't yet know Him. We're the people who share the gospel within the framework of the fulfillment of the Great Commission, which is more than helping a person say a prayer of faith. It implies guiding them to repentance, forgiveness of their sins through Christ, discipleship, baptism and encouraging and teaching them to obey all that the Master taught us.

A Victorious Spiritual Life: Philippians

Third Quarter

The Prayer of a Friend in Prison
A Life Passionate for Christ
Christian Unity
Christ: the Example of Humility
Christians Don't Grumble
Timothy and Epaphroditus: Faithful Servants
Putting Our Complete Trust in Christ
We Have to Lose to Win
Pressing On to Achieve Our Goal
Citizens of Heaven
Rejoice in the Lord Always
Divine Mindfulness
Christ is More Than Enough



The Prayer of a Friend in Prison

Arturo Gasca (Uruguay)

Passage to Study: Philippians 1:3-11

Memory Verse: “...this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight...” Philippians 1:9.

Lesson Aim: To understand the role of Christian love in the realization of a full and holy life.

Introduction

The letter to the Philippians is the most personal of all Paul's letters because in it, the apostle shows his affection for the recipients. If we were to describe Paul from this epistle, we could say that he was a happy man since this letter is full of love, joy and peace. With it, Paul sought to encourage the church to persevere in faith and love, even in the midst of persecution (Philippians 1:9, 3:1, 4:4).

No one would think that this letter was written from a prison. Let's take a minute to honestly reflect on what our attitude would be if we had to write a letter as prisoners for preaching the gospel. What tone would our writing have? What emotions would be contained in our letter?

Paul's intercessory prayer for the Philippian brothers and sisters had characteristics that must be enumerated.

1. There isn't a specific prayer written in the letter. In Philippians 1:3, Paul wrote that he prayed whenever he remembered them. In verse 4, he used the word 'always' and in verse 5, he ended by saying: "from the first day until now." The apostle's prayer for his friends was a permanent prayer.
2. Paul's intercessory prayer was heavily charged with love. In verse 7, the apostle wrote: "because I have you in my heart" and later in verse 8 he said: "God can testify how I long for all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus." Paul's prayer for the Philippians was motivated by the bond of love that existed between them.
3. It was a prayer that contemplated the spiritual needs of those for whom he interceded. Paul's prayer wasn't unaware of the situation of the Philippians. On the contrary, despite the precariousness of communication of the time, Paul kept himself informed of the situation of the churches that he had helped plant. In fact, Epaphroditus had been sent by the Philippian church with an offering (Philippians 4:18) Surely, he also updated Paul on what his brothers and sisters in the faith were going through.

4. It was a prayer of gratitude. Paul didn't forget to thank God for his Philippians friends. Not only was he grateful that they remembered him in prison, He also thanked God because they remained in the faith.
5. Clearly, Paul's situation as he wrote these words was adverse, but that further enriched the situation, since the letter wasn't written from the comfort of a desk in an ideal situation. Paul's prayer for his friends, at the same time, was an appeal for them to persevere in Christ. Paul knew that prayer sometimes requires the will and effort of the one who prays or of those for whom the prayer is made. Many times, God calls us to collaborate in answering our prayers. When we make our petitions to God in prayer, we must be willing to be involved in the answers to prayer.

Having said that, let's go on to analyze in depth the content of Paul's prayer. We will try to infer what the apostle's desire was for his friends in the situation in which they were living.

I. Paul prays for fellowship in the gospel (Philippians 1:3-5)

In Paul's thought, fellowship was a very valuable concept and this referred to much more than having a good relationship with the believers. It was an expression of love and gratitude, whose beginning, development and end was to be found in Christ. Therefore, we shouldn't be surprised by the fact that the apostle talks about 'partnership in the gospel' (v. 5).

Partnership implies collaboration. A deep fellowship that united Paul with his Philippian readers, based on a common element that should be greater than any difference. Biblical fellowship isn't intended to eliminate natural differences between human beings but implies working together for the common cause – sharing the Good News about Christ.

Christian unity has its foundation in Christ (His nature, His ministry, His teachings and the hope of His return) and not on any other basis. In the Pauline idea of fellowship,

Christ is the cohesive agent of all things, rather than things like nationality, systems of thought, politics or philosophy. Paul's theology was always Christocentric.

For this apostle, fellowship was a cause and, at the same time, a consequence. One of the relevant concepts of Pauline thought is the famous phrase 'in Christ'. The idea of fellowship was inherent in this concept: being in Christ was the equivalent of being a member of the body of Christ. He wrote it in his letter to the Romans: "...so in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others" (Romans 12:5).

Pauline concept of fellowship has two directions: (1) a vertical direction, that is, the relationship of the believer with Christ; and (2) a horizontal direction, of believers among themselves, and with non-believers. The second was a consequence of the first, while offering a development platform for the first. These dimensions of fellowship are inseparable.

When we review the biblical and extrabiblical accounts of the early church, we can clearly see that the unity of the church was built around the person of Christ. For example, in Acts 2:42, we're told that Christians "...devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer." Christ was present in 'the doctrine of the apostles.' They spent their time teaching about the doctrine of Christ and His saving work. We also see the Master in the 'breaking of bread', referring exclusively to what we call the sacrament of Holy Communion, which speaks directly to us of Him, of His sacrifice and the promise of His return.

Finally, the prayer was done in the name of Jesus. We conclude this point by mentioning that 'being in Christ' implies belonging to a community of faith, gathering together and exercising love among ourselves, and from the church to the world, as well as maintaining a living relationship with the risen Christ through prayer and spiritual disciplines. These are two sides of the same coin.

In the midst of the persecution suffered by the believers in Philippi, isn't it logical that Paul wanted for them to remain united with Christ and among themselves? The worst way to deal with a stormy situation is to do it alone. Christ offers us the possibility of going through the ups and downs of life sustained by a community with whom we share the hope that our sufferings won't be eternal, in vain, or greater than our hopes. Paul knew how important and significant this was to the Philippians, and therefore, he prayed that they might enjoy God's love and the fellowship of the flock.

Questions:

- What were the two directions of the Pauline fellowship?
- Do you think this is a reality today in the family of faith?

II. Paul prays for abundance of love in the heart (Philippians 1:6-9)

This section begins with an affirmation that connects and intertwines the concepts of fellowship and love: "...he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus" (v. 6). With this message, Paul reinforced the idea of fellowship worked by God, through love.

Fellowship begins and remains in the person of Christ. The apostle understood that Christ is synonymous with love, and he never forgot this indispensable component. Fellowship must not be just a theory, but rather, it must be a reality in the life of the church.

The concept of 'love' has been very poorly treated by modern society. It's been reduced to an emotion that comes and goes, to a selfish illusion that only seeks to satisfy one's own emotional needs, where the only thing that's considered of the other person is how he or she can satisfy me. In all relationships (friendship, marriage, family), the ego plays a crucial role. A selfish concept of love is dangerous, harmful and makes the other person an object.

People are inclined to be more concerned about not being disappointed or hurt than about giving love. The 'I love you', 'I am like this', 'I need you', 'you make me happy', 'you must accept me as I am', are very common expressions. But isn't this a selfish vision of love and friendship? We're not willing to give others a chance to disappoint us. We want everyone to be our friends, to love us, but we don't want to do the same for them.

Isn't getting hurt in a relationship something that happens often? Will there be a person who never disappoints us at some point? Do we never disappoint anyone by demanding the same from others? If friendship were only possible between people who don't disappoint each other, what then is the value of forgiveness and mercy?

Biblical love is far beyond the current western concept of love. To begin with, biblical love is completely objective and transcendent. 1 John 4:8 says that "God is love." This means that love exists beyond emotions and circumstances; it's the very essence of God. Believers, in whose heart the Spirit of God dwells, may become angry, but they won't allow themselves to hate or hold a grudge. Let's remember what the Bible says: "Whoever claims to love God yet hates a brother or sister is a liar. For whoever doesn't love their brother and sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they haven't seen" (1 John 4:20).

Christians can't ignore love, nor keep on hating, showing bitterness, or resentment. An inescapable value for Christians is forgiveness. For fellowship to be possible, we must develop the capacity to forgive. Jesus made this clear, for forgiveness was one of the fundamental themes of his teaching.

The motivation for forgiveness lies in the mere fact of having been forgiven by God and nothing else. This is how we see it in the parable of the two debtors, in which one of them didn't forgive (Matthew 18:21-35). The preface to this parable was Peter's question: "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?" (Matthew 18:21). Peter used the 'seven' intentionally to demonstrate a large number to the Lord, higher than the number three required by the rabbinical teaching of the time. However, Jesus responded with a tremendous statement: "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times" (Matthew 18:22). What the Master meant is that there are no limits to forgiveness. He raised Peter's 'seven' to the power of seven by ten. Jesus' answer shouldn't be understood literally, but rather we must forgive to the extent that God forgives us. We must be always ready to forgive and to forgive everyone.

In the Lord's Prayer, the Lord taught the same concept: "And forgive us our debts, as we also forgive our debtors" (Matthew 6:12). Forgiveness is a gift of grace that we receive from God. As a result, we should freely forgive. When we became Christians, it was because God forgave us of our sins, so, forgiveness should be in our 'spiritual DNA'.

Love perfects us because it teaches us to love regardless of whether we like the person or not. We must forgive whether the person loves us or not, and whether they have done us good or harm. Forgiveness makes that love possible; in fact, God showed His love in that He was willing to forgive us, and paid the price to make forgiveness of our debt possible (Ephesians 1:7).

In Matthew 5:43-48, Jesus taught about love of enemies. Without forgiveness, this love would be impossible. Biblical love isn't an illusion that is produced from 'chemistry' between two people. Love is, above all, a decision to give continually, to forgive, to appreciate the other person for what they are, and to want to see others as God sees them, in spite of the fact that they may be corrupt and perverse, and even to the point of ignoring their offensive actions. Paul knew this, he underscored his love for the Philippians and exhorted them not only to love, but to abound in love more and more (Philippians 1:9).

Questions:

- Do you notice any difference between the concept of love that the world teaches and that of the Bible? If so, list the differences.
- What do you consider to be essential ingredients to be in fellowship with our neighbors?

III. Paul prays for lives pleasing to God (Philippians 1:10-11)

Finally, Paul revealed to them the final purpose: "...so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ (v. 10). In this part of the lesson, ask your students how they think fellowship relates to being sincere, blameless, and full of the fruit of righteousness.

John Wesley wrote in his preface to his collection of hymns: "The gospel of Christ knows of no religion other than social, nor holiness other than social. We have this commandment from Christ, that he who loves God, also loves his brother" (González, Justo (General Editor). Works by Wesley. Volume 9: spirituality and hymns, notes to the New Testament, first part. USA: Wesley Heritage Foundation, Inc., 1996, pp. 239-240). Surely, the apostle Paul thought the same. Holiness and piety are expressed in community life. Being in fellowship with others is the necessary product of a life in communion with God.

To love your neighbor is to honor God. God through Jesus Christ, identified with all of us, and ultimately, we're all bearers of His image. Finally, let's remember that for this fellowship to be possible, forgiveness, love and mercy are necessary.

Paul wrote "that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation" (2 Corinthians 5:19). If Christ gave His life to reconcile us to the Father, we must to be agents of reconciliation, and this forces us to live and actively seek fellowship with our neighbors.

Questions:

- Personally, reflect on what actions you should take in order to be in fellowship with your family, brothers and sisters in faith, neighbors, coworkers, etc.
- If you're not in fellowship with someone in particular, seek God's direction and devise a small plan of action that will help you to be reconciled with that person.

Conclusion

Paul's prayer for the Philippians lets us see his concern that they remain united. Unity is vital for the church to fulfill its purpose of witnessing of God's love for the world. But this isn't achieved by itself, but is built through fellowship, love and forgiveness on the basis of our relationship with Christ. As Christians, we must be careful not to disassociate the idea of community life from personal devotional life. Holiness is social; that is to say, it's expressed in our life in community, and in character that watches over the peace of the world and the unity of the body of Christ.



A Passionate Life for Christ

Eudo Prado (Venezuela)

Passage to Study: Philippians 1:12-30

Memory Verse: "For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain" Philippians 1:21.

Lesson Aim: To accept the challenge of living passionately for Christ.

Introduction

Have you ever wondered how many of Paul's friends abandoned him after his conversion? How many told him that he was completely crazy going down this new road? How many would have tried to make him see how important he was to the cause, and the 'inconvenience' of his new beliefs?

Only Paul himself could give us details of his experiences after his conversion. But what we can be absolutely sure of is the intensity of his dedication to the cause of the gospel. The so-called 'prison epistles', among which is this letter to the Philippian Christians, reveal his willingness to serve Christ and His work in all times and circumstances.

In this beautiful passage, we clearly see the great passion for Christ that distinguished the life of the apostle. Paul denied nothing of himself for his beloved Lord and Savior. He was flooded with an incomparable sense of gratitude for the grace of God manifested in him, and a deep conviction of his duty to urgently preach the gospel to all people. He had responded without reservation to the "supreme call of God in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 3:14). This meant a daily struggle translated into innumerable sufferings and in permanent danger of death. What an incredible life Paul led! Without a doubt, it challenges us to surrender ourselves completely to Christ.

Tozer said: "We need to do something about the cross, and we can only do one of two things: flee from the cross, or die on it" (Tozer, *AW The root of the righteous*. Spain: Editorial CLIE, 1994, p. 75). It remains to be asked ... which of these two paths will we take?

I. A passionate life for Christ as a witness (Philippians 1:12-17)

Often when we go through suffering, our disposition for Christian witness diminishes. The confusion produced by such moments tends to blur our personal devotion and availability to God's work. But when our hearts are full of passion for Christ, we can overcome any adversity,

and with the help of God's grace, make it an opportunity to grow in faith and witness to the gospel.

A. Announcing Christ in adversity (vs. 12-14)

At first glance, this seems contradictory, but deep down, suffering can show the world the power of the gospel. It's possible that the Philippians came to think that Paul's imprisonment represented a failure; however, it was rather the opposite. Perhaps, critics pointed out that Paul's imprisonments were proof of his lack of apostolic authenticity. Some believers surely thought that if God had truly called him, things had to go well for him. Paul explained that his imprisonments, instead of representing a failure for the cause of Christ, had resulted in the advance of the gospel (v. 12). Many people had been shocked by his testimony.

The degree of difficulty in our life or ministry isn't an indication that God isn't with us, or that His purpose has been truncated. Rather, it's the opportunity for God to glorify himself and show his supernatural power.

The word 'advance' in verse 12 is translated from the Greek *prokope*, which literally means "to break through" (Harrison, Everett. *Moody Bible Commentary, New Testament. USA: Baptist House of Publications, 2002, p. 372*). It was a military term that encompassed the idea of someone who was making his way through the forest while walking along a difficult path. In other words, the terminology here indicates that it's not easy to testify of Christ in the midst of the discouragement that adversity usually produces, but if we strive in God, we can find spiritual benefit. Sometimes we have to go through the hard path of illness, the death of a friend or family member, an economic crisis, persecution for faith, or any other difficult event. This is where the power of God is perfected in our weakness, resulting in the maximum progress of the gospel (2 Corinthians 12:9).

Another very significant verse is Philippians 1:13: “As a result, it has become clear throughout the whole palace guard and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ.” The palace guards or ‘praetorium’, probably refers to the so-called Praetorian Guard, the elite force of the Roman army, or the government palace itself. The following expression “and to everyone else” is perhaps broader and referred to the entire sphere of the Roman government. We’re speaking here of a testimony without limits. Countless people in the sphere of the Roman government had received clear and shocking testimony of the meaning of the apostle Paul’s sufferings in relation to the person and cause of Christ. In the final salutations of this same letter (Philippians 4:22), the apostle attested to the great victory of the gospel in Rome, which had transformed many lives, including some in the government palace.

We learn that there is no justification for halting our testimony at the moment when conflicts appear, but rather we need to do the opposite. Trials are the challenge for a more courageous Christian witness. Paul went to one of the most difficult and dangerous places where one could think of preaching at that time, but there, despite his prisoner status, his testimony was incredibly effective. He remained ‘joyful’ in the midst of difficulties (Philippians 4:4).

Also, such an attitude of integrity always has a positive side effect on the spiritual life of other believers. Because of his chains, most of the brothers and sisters had become confident in the Lord and were daring all the more “to proclaim the gospel without fear” (Philippians 1:14). Probably in this life, we will never fully understand how far we have influenced people when we have witnessed courageously about Christ in the midst of life’s adversities. Perhaps, it will only be in eternity that the fruit obtained in those moments of dedication and sacrifice that have cost us so much on a personal level will be clearly revealed.

B. Announcing Christ for the right reason (vs. 15-17)

Next, the passage teaches us the importance of preaching the gospel for the right reasons. In verses 15-18, Paul pointed out that “some preach Christ out of envy and rivalry.” Perhaps those people had a hidden interest in vying for or pretending to be the best in the church. He doesn’t mean here that they distorted Christian doctrines, but they preached from selfish ambition, wanting to cause trouble for Paul. Preaching the gospel out of envy or rivalry isn’t foreign to our times, but how much damage it does to the body of Christ! The apostle James also spoke about envy, selfishness, ambitions, and strife that don’t come from God (James 3:13-18); and he concluded verse 18 saying: “Peacemakers who sow in peace reap a harvest of righteousness.” What is of God will always bring edification to the church.

Finally, Paul spoke of those who preach the gospel “out of love” (v. 16). They are the ones who can say: “Christ’s love compels us...” (2 Corinthians 5:14-15). These preach out of a sense of gratitude to the Lord, moved by the passion that awakens in their hearts the wonderful love of Christ for sinners.

Questions:

- What had the Philippians come to think about Paul’s imprisonment? Explain.
- Have we ever experienced something similar? How do we face it?
- How passionately do we preach the gospel?

II. A passionate life for Christ in faith (Philippians 1:18-26)

To testify passionately of Christ, we need to be sustained by faith, especially when everything seems to conspire against us. A biographer, a missionary to Burma, said that in the midst of the appalling sufferings to which he was subjected, including imprisonment and torture for many years because of his preaching of the gospel, he and his wife Ann were sustained by ‘an invincible faith.’ When there is a passion for Christ in our hearts, we can remain steadfast even though the world is falling apart around us.

A. Sustained by prayer and the Spirit (v. 19)

In verse 19, Paul expressed great confidence in his next deliverance. At times Paul used this word to refer to spiritual salvation, but here he used it in the sense of his physical liberation. But Paul’s confidence wasn’t based on any human element, it was based on the will of God. For this, he asked for prayer (here a Greek term that literally means “supplications”).

The other foundation of their trust was the “provision of the Spirit of Jesus” This last expression probably points to the effective presence of the Holy Spirit in the ministry of the church.

We always need to rest in Christ from our cares and worries, even those related to the work of God Himself. How valuable intercessory prayer is! If Paul, a great apostle, always required the support of the church in prayer, how much more do we!

B. Trusting in the good will of God (vs. 20-26)

“I eagerly expect and hope that I will in no way be ashamed” (v. 20a). This phrase contains one of the most significant expressions of this passage. This is a beautiful statement of confidence in the “good and acceptable and perfect will of God” (Romans 12:2). In verses 20b and 21, the apostle affirms that God had never failed him, and therefore He won’t fail us either. When we walk in His will, any event that happens to us will be God’s best for us.

We may not have all the answers to every adverse situation, but we know that God has a firm purpose for us (Romans 8:28). Only communion with God can give the Christian such a sense of security. We need to place our full trust in His will, whatever our situation.

In verses 22-26, Paul revealed a deep inner conflict. According to his own feelings, he wanted to leave this world promptly to be with Christ, however, the imperious need of the church retained his affections. The first idea seemed much better to him, but the second, the most necessary for the church. So, God allowed it. According to some commentators, Paul was released from this imprisonment, and later, he made a fourth missionary trip, which is mentioned in the pastoral letters.

Questions:

- What was the reason that Paul asked for the church prayer?
- Am I aware of the importance of intercession?
- And as a church are we also aware? Comment.

III. A passionate life for Christ in conduct (Philippians 1:27-29)

Paul is also an example of a life passionate for holiness. What he expected from each believer was that his conduct would correspond to the holy call received from the gospel. However, the context in which the Philippian brothers found themselves meant a permanent struggle to stay in line with the call. It took a real passion for Christ to stand firm in the midst of such a decadent society.

From verse 27, it can be seen that Paul was concerned about the condition of the church in the midst of such difficult circumstances. Frank Thielman said: "In the same way that verse 12 announced to the Philippians that Paul was going to give them information about himself, verse 27 hints that he's now going to dedicate this part of the letter to talking about them" (Thielman, Frank. Biblical Commentary with NIV Application: Philippians. USA: Editorial Vida, 2013, p. 104).

The passion for Christ can be evidenced when the believer carries out behavior worthy of the gospel. The conduct of a Christian must correspond with his words. In other words, what we *do* must agree with what we *say*. Many times, there is a marked duality between the how Christians act and what they say. Their worship is inconsistent with their ethical standards. Paul demanded several important things from the church here:

A. We need to have the same purpose (v. 27a)

Verse 27a speaks of the need to be "... firm in the one spirit ..." One of the things that diminishes the effectiveness of the church is the discrepancy of purpose among its members. Instead, a passionate love for Christ allows for

agreement despite the small differences of opinion that often arise. This allows efforts to be directed towards a common goal. Love helps us overcome any type of barriers. Paul said that love binds everything "together in perfect unity" (Colossians 3:14). The main purpose that unites us is the Great Commission.

B. We need to fight together for faith (v.27b)

Philippians 1:27b says: "striving together as one for the faith of the gospel." Thielman noted that "Paul is telling the Philippians to lead their lives according to the gospel and not according to the standards that society required to be a good citizen of Philippi. Although the temptation to yield to their adversaries (v. 28) is great, the first thing they should consider is their loyalty to the norms of the kingdom of God as they appear expressed in the gospel" (Thielman, Frank. Commentary Biblical with NIV Application: Philippians USA: Editorial Vida, 2013, p.107). The gospel configures us as a different people, free from the selfish individualism that characterizes the world around us, and marked by unconditional love for others. On the other hand, Paul's idea here seems to be that of a team of gladiators who fight together, protecting and helping each other in order to achieve victory.

C. We need courage against those who oppose us (vs. 28-29)

Verse 28 starts by saying: "without being frightened in any way by those who oppose you." The Philippians Christians faced tenacious adversaries, but the steadfast fight of the believers in defense of the faith was an unequivocal sign of their salvation, and at the same time, it was a clear sign to the unbelievers who were on the way to their destruction (v. 28b). Paul invited them to consider it an honor to suffer for Christ (v. 29).

Obviously, the battle of faith isn't easy. It cost our Lord His life. God's Word encourages us to consider Jesus' example (Hebrews 12:3). Let's not be intimidated by adversaries, for "If God is for us, who can be against us?" (Romans 8:31).

Questions:

- Why do we Christians need to live striving for the same purpose?
- What is our purpose as a church today? Comment.

Conclusion

We need to have courage to share the gospel in an unbelieving and adverse world, a firm confidence in the will of God, and conduct characterized by practical holiness. These are the signs of a life passionate for Christ. The passion for the Lord doesn't come from ourselves but from the grace of God that fills our being.

Passage to Study: Philippians 2:2-4

Memory Verse: "...make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind" Philippians 2:2.

Lesson Aim: To understand the importance of service in unity that the church should give, and the practical ways of achieving it according to the advice of the apostle Paul.

Introduction

In order to better understand the reason that prompted the apostle Paul to write to the brothers and sisters of the church that he himself founded in Philippi, we need to understand the context. This city was the first Greek city of Macedonia, and the first European city where Paul announced the gospel of Christ and founded a church.

Philippi received its name from Philip II of Macedonia, father of Alexander the Great, who conquered the region in the 4th century B.C. This area was famous for the battle of Philippi in 42 BC, where the Roman armies of Anthony and Octavian defeated the forces of Brutus and Cassius. One of them defended the Roman Republic and the other wanted to turn it into the Roman Empire. In the end, the empire won, and Philippi became a Roman colony, which was populated mostly by veterans of the Roman army.

Philippi was a very important city within its region. In it, Latin was spoken, and its social, political, and religious organization was so similar to that of Rome that its inhabitants felt as if they were living in the very capital of the empire. It was like Rome away from the capital, to the point that it came to be called 'Miniature Rome.'

The inhabitants of Philippi had a high civic and regional pride. They boasted of being citizens of Rome. It was a proud Roman colony, exempt from taxes with many privileges. Like all human beings, the Philippians battled with their pride.

In Acts 16:12-40, we're told of the birth of Christ's church at Philippi. It was during the apostle Paul's second missionary journey that God gave him a vision of a Macedonian man asking for help (vs. 6-10). Paul, Silas, and Timothy immediately set sail for Philippi. When they got there, they announced the gospel, and a woman named Lydia was the first convert (v. 14). Then in the name of Jesus Christ, Paul expelled a spirit of divination

from the life of a slave girl, who gave good profits to her owners (vs. 16-18). As a result, Paul and Silas ended up in jail. But it was there inside the prison that a great miracle happened. The place shook, and all the doors flew open. Then, the jailer in charge wanted to kill himself thinking that the prisoners had fled, but Paul told him that none of them had escaped. The jailer, seeing himself close to death, decided to give his life to Christ, along with all his family (vs. 19-34). This is how the beautiful church in Philippi began.

The entire letter to the Philippians is a message from the heart of a pastor to his beloved church, of a father encouraging and exhorting his children. We can see the heart of a mature servant who gave his life to the preaching of the gospel, which led him to suffer a lot. But this letter gives us a message of strength, confidence, encouragement and joy, so necessary for us who are also often overwhelmed by the weight of living in this fallen world.

The three verses that we'll deal with next, as well as the entire epistle, are a valuable testimony of how the power of the gospel is able to break through even in environments where there is as much pride and hardness of heart as there was in Philippi, and how the Lord is able to transform even the hardest heart.

I. Unity through love (Philippians 2:2)

Philippians 2:2 says: "make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind." (v. 2).

A. Complete joy

The measure of the Apostle Paul's joy wasn't complete because he discerned that there was a lack of humility and unity. Paul's main desire wasn't for his prompt release from prison, but rather, the spiritual progress of all the Philippian brothers and sisters.

B. Paul's request to the Philippians

The apostle Paul asked the church at Philippi to be of the same mind (see v. 5), that is, to have unanimity of opinions and feelings (thoughts and feeling are included in the Greek verb *phronéte*). They must all share "the same love". That is, they must all share loving concern, unanimously vibrating together to the sound of the same ideals and driven by the same motivations with unity of purpose.

C. One in spirit

Does this mean that all Christians are expected to think and act in the same way? The Word of God nowhere gives such a suggestion. Although of course it's expected of us as the children of God that we agree on the great foundations of the Christian faith. Clearly, on many minor issues, there will be a lot of differences of opinion. Uniformity and unity aren't the same. It's possible to have the latter without having the former. So, even if we disagree on minor issues, we can put aside our own opinions, that don't compromise any biblical principle, for the good of others.

D. Being of the same mind

This really means having the mind of Christ ... seeing things as He would see them and responding to them as He would have. Sharing the same love means showing the same love that Christ has shown us, a love that spared no cost. Being unanimous means working together in harmony for a common goal.

Finally, feeling the same thing means acting in such a united way that it becomes evident that the mind of Christ is directing our activities. But this doesn't mean that we're a living exactly like each other, or duplicates, nor are we living portraits of our spiritual leaders. There are people who try to imitate those whom they admire and for whom they feel great affection.

Expressing unity in purpose is to allow the mind of Christ, His way of thinking, to be in us. This allows for differences of expression, differences in gifts, differences in forms of service, and even differences in less important doctrines, but without fighting because of them.

Therefore, no one in the Lord's church should confront brothers and sisters in the faith on certain controversial issues jeopardizing the unity of the body of believers, the spiritual family, for non-essential and minor matters. If we have the mind of Christ, we will be united in the great principles of faith.

Questions:

- Share your own experience of how service to God and His church brought joy to your life.
- List some practical ways that you can further promote unity in your congregation.

II. Unity through humility (Philippians 2:3)

Philippians 2:3 says: "Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves."

A. The root of some problems

Let's look at the first expression of this verse that we've just read: "Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit." This underscores what the Apostle Paul had previously said about some people preaching Christ out of envy or rivalry (Philippians 1:15).

We can affirm that many of the current difficulties of churches aren't due to doctrinal differences, but are caused by human passions or feelings such as envy and rivalries that cause conflict. It's sad that some people naturally cause problems. They seem to be problematic in nature and were born to live in permanent conflict with those around them. We need to follow Paul's advice about acting in such a way as to not cause rivalry, without envy. If we did this, almost all problems among Christians would be eliminated.

B. Examining our motivations

Considering Paul's teaching, we could say that if we're carrying out some activity in our church through conflicts and personal confrontations, it would be better to do nothing at all. We could say the same about activities which are carried out with the purpose of being recognized in some way by others. There are some believers who do something only because they hope to receive public recognition for their actions. They want to be prominent. We have to ask ourselves, do Christians need to be recognized and praised for what they do to serve?

Paul's advice is to do nothing out of selfishness or vanity, nor provoke conflicts or compete as rivals. Paul exhorted the church in his letter to eliminate the attitude of wanting to be noticed, which is a symptom of pride.

People who create rivalries and show envy are very common also in our days. Later on in Chapter 2, we see the supreme example of the Lord who took the form of a slave to bring salvation to us. Pride and envy have no place in Church families.

C. The pastor's advice

The alternative presented by the apostle Paul is found in the second part of verse 3: "Rather, in humility value others above yourselves." Philippians 4:2 says: "I plead with Euodia and I plead with Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord." It seems that these two sisters had some problems in their relationships. They seem to have been causing difficulties through their rivalry. They seem to have been in conflict. This had come to Paul's attention and he wanted them to resolve their conflict.

These problems are very common today when one person or another wants to be on top. Sometimes our personalities clash with other people in the congregation. Paul's advice is to consider other people better than ourselves. The conflicts of the eagerness to stand out, of fearing of being displaced by others, need to be resolved. They often present themselves as administrative problems, or conflicts of competence. We shouldn't be looking for the highest places in the church but rather we should serve, each esteeming each other as superior to ourselves.

We must recognize that we cannot resolve these sinful tendencies by our own strength. On our own we can't become so humble that we consider others more than ourselves (v. 3). Arrogance is a deeply rooted sin and we need to pray for the help and intervention of the Holy Spirit to deal with those perverse attitudes of our old nature.

Questions:

- What would be some correct motivations for church service?
- What are some practical ways to demonstrate obedience to the apostle Paul's advice to consider others as superior to ourselves?

III. Unity through compassion (Philippians 2:4)

Philippians 2:4 says: "not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others."

A. Maintaining balance

Self-esteem is how we really understand and know ourselves. But we can have too high a regard for ourselves, and this leads to pride, arrogance, vanity and a feeling that we're superior to others. Regarding this, Paul

said that we shouldn't consider ourselves superior to others, but rather, we must look at and treat everyone around us as superior to ourselves. That is humility.

B. Yielding my place

The Cambridge English Dictionary defines selfishness as: "Someone who is selfish only thinks of their own advantage: (<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/selfish>)

Selfishness is thinking of ourselves, of our interests, forgetting the good of others. Paul admonishes us not to be like that. We need to be humble. Esteeming others as better than ourselves, seeking the well-being of others, is an indispensable factor for life in communion, in harmony and in unity.

Questions:

- Make a short list of problems that can be avoided in church if personal pride is removed.
- What are some practical ways to teach those younger in the faith the importance of giving up our position for love?

Conclusion

The unequalled love of Christ in us will lead us to have the same feeling, to strive for holy unity, encouraging each other always, not being vainglorious, and genuinely showing interested in the well-being of those around us. To achieve all this, we must develop a life constantly listening to God and allowing Him to change us. This way the church will shine with the light of Christ.



Christ: The Example of Humility

Raúl Soto (Chile)

Passage to Study: Philippians 2:6-11

Memory Verse: “And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross!” Philippians 2:8.

Lesson Aim: To understand that only Christ can teach us how to live humbly.

Introduction

As Christians, we have the assurance that we belong to the Kingdom of Heaven. This becomes a reality in our lives thanks to Christ. This has a very important meaning because it allows us to have an identity. But our identity doesn't only come from the fact that we're citizens of the Kingdom of God; we also need to develop the characteristics that identify us as part of His Kingdom. The apostle Paul taught us in the letter to the Philippians that Christ is the greatest example of humility that we can find in Scripture.

Humility is an important characteristic of a citizen of the kingdom of God. It must be present in all Christians. To be humble isn't an option, it's not something that we can overlook. We need to develop it in our lives with the Lord's help.

Philippians 2:5 says: “have the same mindset as Christ Jesus.” He's our quintessential example of humility, and consequently, He's the one we must follow and imitate in order to be citizens of the Kingdom of Heaven.

When we speak of true humility, we're speaking of something deeper than an action that appears to be humble. We're talking about something that reflects the essence of who we are as Christian people. True humility springs from a heart whose essence is to be humble.

Genuine humility isn't just an imitation, or false. We cannot pretend to be humble, or think that it will just appear. It has nothing to do with who we are physically, or what we wear, but with what we are in our deepest being. It springs up from a sincere heart full of love for others. Following Jesus' example means walking the same path that our Master walked. In other words, we must follow His examples and teachings. Jesus is our example, He's the model we need to imitate. Scripture teaches us that we must “have the same mindset as

Christ Jesus (Philippians 2:5), and humility is one of His attributes.

Jesus said: “Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart” (Matthew 11:29). Jesus tells us here that He's both gentle and humble and He wants us to learn this from Him. So, we need to learn to follow and imitate Him, because as His children, this is what He wants us to do.

Those who have this same sense of humility and meekness are those who have been transformed by the power of Jesus Christ. There is no way we can live in true humility without having previously had a transforming experience by the power of the Son of God. In other words, to have “His mindset” is to live out the quality of true humility.

When we have been transformed by Jesus Christ, we're able to have ‘His mindset’ and with it, the ability to live in true humility. Let's see in this portion of Paul's letter written to the Philippians, the meaning of Christ's humility. And then we can decide to imitate Him, and with His help, be true citizens of the Kingdom of Heaven.

I. He didn't cling to his divinity (Philippians 2:6)

The apostle Paul taught in this passage how God, in the person of Christ, presents us with the true attitude of humility that we as Christians need to display in our lives. The expression “being in very nature God” (v.6), means that Jesus was equal to God. In other words, there is an acknowledgment that Christ is God, and His incarnation gives us the ultimate example of humility. Also, this expression tells us that Christ is equal to God, He is God Himself, so to look at Christ is to look at God. Both have the same precedence, they are both of the same essence.

Peter states that Jesus is “the Christ, the Son of the living God” (Matthew 16:16), and he is present in the life of every Christian. So, our eyes are spiritually opened and we’re able to recognize Christ as God. In this way, we can understand the act of extreme humility that Jesus Christ did for humanity. Being God, He humbled himself and renounced His divine privileges.

Philippians 2:6 continues that He: “did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage.” This tells us that Christ, being God, didn’t cling to His divinity in order to act in favor of humanity.

He wanted to teach us something much deeper. He needed to show us with His own life what true humility is. This expression also tells us that Jesus Christ, being God, “did not divest himself of his divine attributes; he simply limited himself with regard to using them to fulfill his mission” (Taylor, Grider and Taylor: Beacon Theological Dictionary. USA: CNP, 1984, p.386). This act is the maximum expression of true humility. Hence, Christ is our paradigm of humility.

Every Christian must understand that humility isn’t an aspect of how we look or what we look like, it’s who we are. We should never use it to exercise authoritarianism, rather, we should live humbly following Christ’s example seen in His life on this earth.

Questions:

- What does the following expression mean? “He did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage.”
- What does that expression say to us today as a church?

II. He agreed to be a man (Philippians 2:7)

Philippians 2:7a says: “...he made himself nothing.” This means that our Lord voluntarily gave up using His divine attributes to fulfill His task of redeeming humanity.

In Christian theology, this has been called ‘*kenosis*’ (the act of emptying) describing the ‘self-emptying’ of Jesus’ own will and His becoming entirely receptive to God’s divine will. This act of obedience and extreme love of our Lord Jesus is what Paul sought that the church should reflect. Being citizens of the Kingdom of Heaven isn’t just a one-time appointment or experience, it’s a whole life lived with true humility. This becomes evident when we put ourselves aside and learn to sacrifice ourselves out of love for others who suffer.

In Philippians 2:7b, we read: “by taking the very nature of a servant.” Jesus Christ, One with God, became a servant (the Greek says slave). He took the nature of a slave out of love for the fulfillment of the plan of

redemption for humanity. He wasn’t obliged to do it. He chose to take our human form, revealing His humility. He renounced His throne to walk among people and share their humanity. Genuine humility must spring from a transformed life coming from a heart that is willing to help those in need, regardless of their condition.

The last part of verse 7 says: “being made in human likeness.” This shows us that Christ not only put himself at the service of mankind, but He became a man. This means that He assumed humanity with all its own characteristics. Jesus felt hunger, cold, anger, sorrow, sadness, joy, etc. He experienced what we experience.

The essence of true humility is being capable of sacrificing everything for the love of others. Christ became a servant in an act of true humility and extreme love. In this way, He taught us the true way of living the Christian life.

Questions:

- What does the expression “He made himself nothing” mean?
- If Christ, being God, became a servant and lowered himself, what should we do?

III. He experienced pain (Philippians 2:8)

Philippians 2:8a says: “And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself...” Our Lord Jesus was a human being, like each of us. In the act of extreme true humility, Christ agreed to pay the price to free humanity. He had no obligation to do so, but he did it out of obedience to the Father. He humbled himself out of love and extreme obedience. Here, we find two profound acts that reflect his true humility:

A. “by becoming obedient to death” (8b)

Death isn’t something which is part of God’s nature. He’s infinite and has no beginning and no end. Death belongs to creation, not to the Creator. Spiritual death is the consequence of Adam and Eve’s disobedience; it’s part of the life of all created beings. Christ came among us in true humility and in His death, He experienced human frailty. He did this in obedience to fulfill God’s eternal purpose.

B. “even death on a cross! (8c)

This reflects extreme humiliation as it represented the place that was prepared only for the worst of humanity, for those who were considered a danger to society. Our Lord wasn’t only willing to go through the experience of death, but He was put to death in the most degrading place of public humiliation in humanity: crucifixion.

All of us who have lived a transforming experience with Christ, and have decided to belong to the kingdom of heaven, are called to reflect Christ's act of supreme humility.

Questions:

- What does the death of Christ mean for humanity?
- What does Jesus' sacrifice on the cross teach us in the context of humility?

IV. God exalted Him (Philippians 2:9-11)

Philippians 2:9a: "Therefore God exalted him to the highest place." Without a doubt, everything that God does for humanity is for love, and He doesn't expect a reward for it. True humility is based on doing everything for love, without expecting anything in return. However, the sacrificial act that Jesus Christ did for us didn't go unnoticed by God. Humility results in exaltation. God Himself established this principle: "... and those who humble themselves will be exalted" (Matthew 23:12).

Christ humbled himself to the utmost, and was exalted to the highest place. It cost a lot for Jesus to come to earth, live among us and die that terrible death, but He did it willingly, without hesitating. Therefore, the Father raised him up and exalted him. Philippians 2:9b says that God "gave him the name that is above every name." The Lord Jesus, after humbling himself voluntarily out of love for humanity, was exalted by God. Jesus taught His disciples that "All those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted" (Luke 14:11).

True humility is based on the fact that we do everything without expecting anything in return. But everything is also done without qualms or complaints, only with the desire to obey. A truly humble Christian leaves everything in God's hands, without expecting anything in return.

Philippians 2:10 says "that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow in heaven and on earth and under the earth." After Christ's sacrificial act on the cross, He continues to be the Lord, the King of all humanity. The consequence of genuine humility will be rewarded by

God, especially by receiving favor, grace, and exaltation on the part of our God (1 Peter 5:5) Christ's authority is cosmic; all powers are placed at his feet. True humility is based on the fact that if we do the will of the Father, we'll be able to achieve the greatest reward ... that of living together with our Lord Jesus Christ for eternity (Matthew 7:21).

Philippians 2:11 says: "and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord." God promised that every person on Earth will have to recognize Christ as the King of all humanity. Christ is Lord of all humanity, and the day will come when everyone will see and confess that He is Lord, regardless of whether they had accepted or rejected Him.

This verse ends by saying: "...to the glory of God the Father" (v. 11b). This expression is linked to the first part of the verse, declaring that even this exaltation isn't for the Lord Jesus' benefit but for the glory of God the Father. When we're humbly following in the Master's footsteps, we too will bring glory to God.

Truly humble people put others before themselves, live lives loving God and their neighbor as themselves, and doing everything not for selfish reasons but for the ultimate goal of pleasing God and bringing glory to His name. All that we are and have belong to God, who wants us to follow the example of Jesus who came to serve others out of love.

Questions:

- What was the result of Christ humbling himself?
- What will be the result for us if we're humble?

Conclusion

The apostle Paul taught us how Christ, being God, was able to humble himself to such an extent that he was sacrificed on the cross. The Creator became human to redeem mankind. God wants us to have the same "mindset" that Jesus had and be humble in the way we are and live day by day for the Glory of God.



Christians Don't Grumble

Sergio Solano (Ecuador)

Passage to Study: Philippians 2:14-18

Memory Verse: "Do everything without grumbling or arguing..." Philippians 2:14.

Lesson Aim: To seek to live a life of integrity and joy before the world, renouncing all malicious criticism or gossip in order to become blameless and pure.

Introduction

Through this study, we'll look at the intimate and consistent relationship that the church at Philippi had with the apostle Paul. This spiritual father taught the Philippians that God was at work in them "to will and to act in order to fulfill His good purpose" (Philippians 2:13). With these indications, the Philippians were exhorted by Paul to live in obedience, even when he was absent. Their status as children of God was to be the result of subjection to the will of God.

The type of conduct, to which the Christians of Philippi were called, responded to the norms of God proclaimed by the apostle Paul. Their conduct had to be faultless and blameless. The same applies to us today. If we live in accordance with the will of God, we'll have a good testimony before those who don't know God.

Rivalries, petty discussions, or bad interpersonal relationships aren't the way we should behave if we want to be genuine witnesses for Christ. We're called to be light and salt on this earth as God's children (Matthew 5:13-16). We all must know how to conduct ourselves prudently, even in situations of conflict.

Every believer has a responsibility to communicate the gospel motivated by compassionate love for the lost. This call commits us to be good testimonies of God's love to our neighbors, and this includes our daily interpersonal relationships. We're also called to show love and concern for our brothers and sisters at church as care and respect towards the church leaders (Hebrews 13:17).

I. There must be zero gossip (Philippians 2:14-15)

The word 'grumbling' used by Paul refers to speaking almost with one's lips closed, which is equivalent to whispering. This same sense of the word can also be found in some passages in the Bible that talk about

the rebellious attitude of the Israelites during their pilgrimage in the desert (Exodus 15:24, 16:2; Numbers 16:41). Whispering behind people's backs is threatening and highly displeasing.

Ask your students:

1. Does this occurs churches? Why?
2. What effect could gossip and grumbling have on our congregations?

God call us is to love each other as believers (John 13:35). If we love one another, we'll be able to prevent these kinds of sinful manifestations in the body of Christ. The kingdom of God must be built from communities that are transparent in character and in love. The book of Colossians also reminds us that whatever we do, "whether in word or deed," we need to "do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him" (Colossians 3:17, 23). On the other hand, Galatians 5:15 warns us "If you bite and devour each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other."

Because we're sinners, we often insist that we're right, and start grumbling or murmuring against those who hold other positions, revealing a list of prejudices we hold which wound others. Often these attitudes of rebellion and grumbling are due to some frustrations of the past that haven't been resolved. Often, we harp back to the past (Exodus 16:2-3), revealing that we're unable to accept new challenges. We need to be open to new ideas rather than challenging them for the good of all. Those who grumble are just thinking of themselves, distancing themselves from their brothers and sisters in the faith. We're called by the Lord to keep the great commandment (Matthew 22:39).

The apostle Paul strongly emphasized the need to be seen by the world as Christians who are “blameless and pure, children of God without fault in a warped and crooked generation” (Philippians 2:15). God expects us to imitate Jesus and live our lives before the world giving a shining example of what He wants to do with each and everyone in the community. Paul said if they did this, they “will shine among them like stars in the sky” (v.15b) guiding people into the Kingdom of Heaven.

Questions:

- What could be the reasons why some Christians manifest reprehensible behaviors such as gossip and criticism?
- Mention Biblical examples of the effects of gossip on God’s people.

II. Holding on to the Word of life (Philippians 2:16)

Ask your students: What does it mean to hold onto the Word of life? Obeying what God has revealed in His Word should be our sufficient support for this present and the future. Obedience is the key to fellowship with God, which results in lives changed by the power and love of God. We need to keep short accounts with God, repenting day by day of our failures or short comings. The Lord calls us to faithfully commit ourselves to His cause. He wants us to glorify Him in all areas of our lives, day by day. Galatians 5:13b calls us to: “. . .serve one another humbly in love.”

We’re called to faithfully serve in love as we imitate Jesus, getting involved in the commissioned tasks of evangelizing, discipling, and working together to build up the church. The Scriptures affirm that we must support one another by being understanding, forgiving, showing humility, having patience, and much love (Ephesians 4:2; Colossians 3:13). If we obey what God lays down in His word, there will be no place in God’s people for destructive criticism, arguments, or strife.

The Word of God is our great foundation and standard of conduct. Psalm 119:105 reminds us of God’s faithfulness through His Word. He wants to lead us on the right path. In the Psalmist’s day, lamps were used to light up the pathways at night. The Bible is our lamp which will never blow out. In those days, it was highly prestigious for each household to keep the lamp on throughout the night and even during the day due to the narrowness or absence of windows.

God’s Word is still valid today and forever (Matthew 24:35); it’s unalterable and non-negotiable. All work for the Lord must be prompted by His Word. Work done for the Lord won’t be done in vain (1 Corinthians 15:58). The power of God’s Word is enough to reprove and correct even our thoughts and behaviors (2 Timothy 3:16).

The restorative and transforming power of the Word of God should always be present. In it, we find enough resources to train us how to live close to God, and His Word can guide us how to help others around us (2 Timothy 3:16-17). James wrote about the importance of putting into practice what the Bible tells us (James 1:22). James said this in the context of how we should behave, and the good and bad that our tongues can bring about. Our conduct must be intentional, that is, corresponding to a spirit of gratitude and obedience to the great love of Jesus Christ poured out without measure to each one of us so that we might attain full salvation and purity of life.

The Bible is like a beam that holds a building up strong, bringing stability. In the midst of any difficulty or distress in our relationships, the Word should dictate our thoughts and actions leading to peaceful relationships and a good witness to our neighbors. Our life must be saturated with the anointing of the Holy Spirit, and faithfulness to God’s Word if we want to be good witnesses.

Questions:

- Describe the results or blessings of acting and/or conducting yourself in relation to others, according to Biblical standards.
- Create a short narrative that represents the life of a Christian who lives according to the Word of God.

III. Living in joy (Philippians 2:17-18)

Paul refers to his suffering and joy in the believers in Philippi: “But even if I am being poured out like a drink offering on the sacrifice and service coming from your faith, I am glad and rejoice with all of you. So, you too should be glad and rejoice with me” (Philippians 2:17-18). As true Christians we need to be joyful even when times are difficult or we’re going through personal difficulties. After a priest would sacrifice a lamb, ram, or bull, he would pour wine beside the altar. This symbolized the dedication of a person in worship to God (Numbers 15:8-10).

When Paul refers to himself as a ‘drink offering,’ he’s expressing the dangerous situation in which he found himself at that moment. He was in prison and this could have led to his death. What motivated him was the gospel of Jesus and love for the believers in the early church around the Roman Empire. However, he considered himself a love offering for the very testimony of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Another verse expresses Paul's conviction and love in declaring the following: "Therefore I endure everything for the sake of the elect, that they too may obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus, with eternal glory" (2 Tim. 2:10). Of course, the essence of Paul's joy lay in the fact that, first, he had not worked in vain. Also, he was expressing his joy at being allowed to offer himself out of love for others. We agree that it's not easy for any person to feel satisfied or joyful in the midst of the difficulties that life holds. However, Paul's secret to experiencing joy rested on the fact that he had been faithful in carrying out his ministry motivated by love and the sacrifice of Christ, his Redeemer.

The conviction and satisfaction of walking and serving the Lord can result in a complete and unalterable faith, leading every Christian to confess with the apostle: "for me, living is Christ, and dying is gain" (Philippians 1:21). This is an expression of complete satisfaction with life now and steady hope for the future. People who are satisfied with their lives don't grumble.

The Philippian Christians could also have this steady assurance as citizens of the heavenly kingdom, and imitators of Jesus Christ and their pastor Paul (Philippians 3:10-11,17). In the midst of danger and persecution, Paul's trustworthy testimony gained great credibility and authority.

The apostle also commended the saints, "So, you too should be glad and rejoice with me" (Philippians 2:18). Joy is one of the highlights of this epistle, and here the apostle is inviting his readers to rejoice with him because of the countless gifts and blessings of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Just as Paul rejoiced in Jesus Christ in the midst of suffering for the sake of the gospel, let's also rejoice, living lives consecrated to Him as worthy children of God.

Questions:

- Based on what convictions do you consider that Paul acted with full joy in everything he did in favor of the gospel of Jesus Christ.
- What biblical passages have helped you cultivate a joyful life in Christian service?

Conclusion

It's important to take up the challenge of renouncing all acts of gossip and criticism against our brothers and sisters in faith. If we do this we will shine in the midst of a lost generation. Let's learn to rest in the faithfulness and normative authority of the Word of God in our daily life and let's rejoice in the Lord at all times and in all circumstances.



Timothy and Epaphroditus: Faithful Servants

César Barco (Ecuador)

Passage to Study: Philippians 2:21-30

Memory Verse: “So then, welcome him in the Lord with great joy, and honor people like him...” Philippians 2:29.

Lesson Aim: To learn from the example of Timothy and Epaphroditus on how to serve.

Introduction

Reflect on the following chart.

Based on this chart, why do you think most church members don't commit to serving in ministry? And how can commitment to ministry be fostered?

Differences Between Going To:	
The Work Place	Church
Five days a week	One day a week
If you don't feel well, you still have to go	If you don't feel well, you don't have to go.
If you don't have money you still go	If you don't have money you don't go
If you're depressed, you still go	If you're depressed, you don't go
If you feel sick, you still go	If you feel sick, you don't go
You work overtime to make more money	You leave as quickly as possible
No problems with co-workers	Problems with fellow church members
You commit and comply	You don't keep your commitments
You stay awake	You fall asleep during the sermon
You work hard, giving your all to your job	You don't help or get involved at all
At work things are done for money ; At church what we do we do for the Lord .	
If you do your best for your boss ; then shouldn't you do your best for your Savior ?	

I. The reality of the believer's commitment to ministry (Philippians 2:21)

Philippians 2:21 says: “For everyone looks out for their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ.” Paul observed that many Christians were too preoccupied with their own needs to spend time working for Christ. We shouldn't allow our agendas and preoccupations to be an excuse for not fulfilling our Christian responsibility

to serve and love others. Unfortunately, many Christians are so busy with their own interests or needs that they stop serving Christ.

We have to add to this list those who follow the gospel so that God may prosper them economically. And then sometimes when God doesn't bring them prosperity, they stumble in their stewardship. Other people follow the gospel to get healed and once they experience the divine miracle, they abandon Christ and are ungrateful (Luke 17:11-19). Others, go to church because of the food package handouts. But Jesus said of the people in His time: “you are looking for me, not because you saw the signs I performed but because you ate the loaves and had your fill” (John 6:26). We don't know fully what other motives there might be. These comments indicate that, unfortunately, not everyone in the church serves the interests of Christ. When we go to Christ, we shouldn't seek stuff for ourselves. Let's be humble and seek only His interests. Jesus said we should seek “first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given” to us too (Matthew 6:33).

Let's analyze the Parable of the prodigal son, told to us by Dr. Luke, one of Paul's companions in ministry. Jesus said: “When he came to his senses, he said, ‘How many of my father's hired servants have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants’” (Luke 15:17-19).

Ask your students:

1. Why was the prodigal son willing to be a laborer for his father?
2. Did this son want to return to his father, or to his father's house?

3. What if there had not been an abundance of bread in his father's house, would he have returned to his father's home?

Unfortunately, the son in this parable story didn't say: "I felt bad about leaving my Father; he always loved me. I deserve to starve; However, I will get up and go to my father, because now I realize that his love is enough for me. Although there is no abundance of bread, I will go with him to learn to love him back as he deserves." Jesus revealed the true intention of humanity represented in the prodigal son who, confusedly, sought God initially for his own interest in satisfying his need from hunger; a hunger that can be seen as both spiritual or through economic hardship.

In the first instance, as humans we don't always seek God because of love. Ask your students: What was the reason that turned you to Christ? It may have been a spiritual need, or to get out of financial trouble. The search for God arises because we need Him, which is correct, since only God has the solution for human needs. The problem arises when believers stop there, relying on God to meet the human needs that made them go to God. We're often like the prodigal son who returned home out of necessity. This young man sought his father for a personal interest; he was perishing because of hunger.

Very often we seek God in the first instance not because we love Him, but because of our needs. Afterwards we discover His love, and having experienced it, we learn to respond by loving Him. As we grow, we no longer approach the Lord out of necessity, but out of true love. As John said, "We love him, because he first loved us" (1 John 4:19).

The Church of the Nazarene encourages and praises the work of all believers in the different ministries. Many people strive and work for Jesus Christ selflessly. We must motivate those brothers and sisters so that they won't be discouraged. Let's faithfully serve Jesus and His church with all our hearts, working for the growth of the influence of the Kingdom of God in our communities.

Questions:

- Why do you think some believers in our churches don't commit to ministry according to Philippians 2:21?
- What does Matthew 6:33 say to us today?

IV. Timothy proved himself to be a dedicated leader (Philippians 2:22-24)

"For everyone looks out for their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ. But you know that Timothy has proved himself..." (vs. 21-22a). There is a marked contrast here. Timothy was a leader who didn't look out for his own interests. Here we see that in verse 21, Paul wasn't just talking about the church members, but he was singling out those people who were his companions in ministry. The previous verses to our study text give us the context: "I hope in the Lord Jesus to send Timothy to you soon, that I also may be cheered when I receive news about you. I have no one else like him, who will show genuine concern for your welfare" (Philippians 19-20).

Paul spoke of Timothy as a servant of Christ (Philippians 1:1), who was sincerely interested in how the church at Philippi was growing. He really cared for them and wasn't interested in any personal gain. Timothy put God and His work first.

A. Responsibilities for pastors and congregations

Now certainly, pastors are servants of God, as suggested in our Manual in paragraph 502: "While affirming the scriptural tenet of the universal priesthood and ministry of all believers, ordination reflects the biblical belief that God calls and gifts certain men and women for ministerial leadership in the church" Manual of the Church of the Nazarene, 2017-2021. USA: CNP, 2018, p.193). This doesn't mean, however, that pastors, having been set apart for leadership, become owners of the congregation. The shepherds aren't the owners of Christ's sheep! They are stewards of the Lord's sheep; shepherds hired by the Prince of Shepherds, Christ Jesus himself.

This needs to be mentioned because today there are some church leaders who have risen up who, instead of building up the kingdom of Christ, have built their own 'kingdoms.' These have served themselves through the church instead of serving it. They have sheared the sheep of Christ to enrich themselves, confusing them, and giving a bad testimony, benefiting from the gospel and not benefiting God's people. Clearly, the Lord said it in His Word that leaders should not: "...think that godliness is a means to financial gain" (1 Timothy 6:5).

This doesn't mean that leaders of the congregations should benefit themselves at the expense of the congregation, neither should they become impoverished. We need to ask according to each context: what would happen if a church is no longer capable of supporting a pastor economically? Does the pastor have the right to demand such support?

Our Manual says something about this in paragraph 115.4: “When agreement has been entered into between the church or the church board and the pastor, the payment of the pastor’s salary in full shall be considered a moral obligation by the church. If, however, the church becomes unable to continue the payment of the salary agreed upon, such inability and failure shall not be considered a sufficient cause for civil action against the church by the pastor” Manual of the Church of the Nazarene, 2017-2021. USA: CNP, p.80).

The writer of this lesson esteems and admires pastors who take on secular work in addition to pastoring. There are churches in situations that cannot remunerate their pastors as they should. However, so that the work of God isn’t hindered by the economic matters, these pastors don’t ask their congregations to support them even though it’s their right. On the contrary, they carry the church on their shoulders and look for another job to be able to support their families and continue with the kingdom of Christ, until their church improves and can pay them when it’s possible.

The apostle Paul was a tentmaker to support himself. He said about the responsibility of the church to support its leaders: “...But we didn’t use this right. On the contrary, we put up with anything rather than hinder the gospel of Christ” (1 Corinthians 9:12). If a church is prosperous and fails to support their pastor with a fair salary to meet their needs, they are failing to fulfill a mandate from God; for the order of Christ was clear: “the Lord has commanded that those who preach the gospel should receive their living from the gospel” (1 Corinthians 9:14).

Ask your students: What should motivate a pastor or missionary to train for ministry? What is the best way to get trained?

B. Timothy: God’s faithful servant.

The purpose of serving Christ is to seek and achieve the interest of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. It has to do with his Kingdom, not ours. Our interests end when we seek to satisfy the interests of the kingdom of heaven. Timothy was like a son to Paul, and Paul could trust him. Paul wrote that Timothy served with him in the gospel.

In Paul’s time, servants had few rights and had to do what their masters told them to do. We are to serve the Lord as Timothy did, not out of a sense of obligation but because we really want to. We have a loving Master! So, it’s worth giving up our own interests to serve His interests. When we understand this, we’ll faithfully serve our Lord in everything. We’ll have no problems in consecrating ourselves to service in ministry. Reflect together on Matthew 6:33.

Questions:

- What does Philippians 2:19-21 teach about Timothy?
- How did Timothy prove himself?
- What principles do we find in this lesson about looking after our pastors?

III. Epaphroditus fell ill (Philippians 2:25-28)

Apparently Epaphroditus also had a ministry because Paul called him his “brother, co-worker and fellow soldier” (v. 25). He was the person who was going to carry the letter to Philippi (v. 28). He was a member of the Philippian church who had been sent to take care of Paul’s needs. (v. 25b). Epaphroditus was concerned because the Philippian Church had heard that Epaphroditus was very ill (v. 26). Paul verified that “Indeed he was ill, and almost died. But God had mercy on him, and not on him only but also on me, to spare me sorrow upon sorrow.” (v. 27)

Paul was sending him back and he asked them to “...welcome him in the Lord with great joy, and honor people like him, because he almost died for the work of Christ. He risked his life to make up for the help you yourselves couldn’t give me” (vs. 29-30). We can see here some profound relationships: The Philippian church that sent Epaphroditus to bless Paul in prison; Paul’s profound love for both Epaphroditus and Timothy, and all of them loved the Lord deeply. Paul told the readers to “welcome him with great joy” (v. 29). Joy is one of the words that is repeated in this letter.

We don’t know what illness Epaphroditus had. People get sick through hard work in ministry or for many other reasons. They may experience stress or maybe have underlying causes such as diabetes, high blood pressure, among others. Ask your students how they can help their pastor and his/her family stay well. Congregations need to take care of their leaders’ health.

Questions:

- What can we learn in this chapter about Epaphroditus?

Conclusion.

Both Timothy and Epaphroditus were faithful servants of the Lord in the great missionary task led by Paul to share the Good News with the people around the Roman empire. May we also put God’s kingdom and His righteousness first in our lives and ministries.



Putting Our Complete Trust in Christ

Marcial Rubio (Perú)

Passage to Study: Philippians 3:2-7

Memory Verse: “But whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ” Philippians 3:7.

Lesson Aim: To understand that no legacy or personal effort can replace the efficacy of the saving work of Jesus Christ.

Introduction

How should we respond to the proliferation of leaders who claim titles such as ‘apostle’, ‘prophet’, ‘the anointed one’, etc.? How should we deal with the seduction of the doctrines of such that displace the cross and the demands of discipleship with a pseudo-gospel that uses Christ and the Bible as mere pretexts to exalt the personal ego and proclaim cheap salvation.

In Paul’s times, the churches lived through similar nightmares, which motivated the apostle to give a forceful response in his epistle to the church at Philippi, whose text and teachings are fully valid for the contemporary church.

I. The fallacy of false doctrines (Philippians 3:2)

The church of Philippi was being attracted, seduced, and confused by the preachers and the doctrines in vogue of that time. The apostle Paul saw the urgent need to denounce and make a series of warnings regarding the Judaizing preachers of that epoch.

A. “Watch out for those dogs”

In our western culture, dogs tend to be highly valued pets, to the point that we even celebrate World Dog Day on July 21st. There are countries where killing a dog is a crime, although killing a human before birth (abortion) is a right. However, in the ancient Orient, “dogs were outcast animals that roamed the streets and fields, sometimes in packs, foraging for food in the rubbish heaps and barking and growling at everyone they encountered” (Barclay, William. *Commentary on the New Testament*, Spain: CLIE Editorial, 1970, pp. 746-747). In connection with this, the Jews of Biblical times used to refer contemptuously to the Gentiles as ‘dogs.’

The apostle Paul turned the analogy on its head, applying it not to gentiles but to the Judaizing Christians who were perverting the Good News about Jesus.

How many ‘dogs’ today roam the churches and ‘bark’ through social media programs and the television, marketing and selling a cheap gospel of entertainment according to their customers’ liking! How many churches have become doctrinally derailed and deranged!

B. “Watch out...for evil doers”

The Judaizing teachers were convinced that the new gentile converts were obliged to observe the innumerable rules and precepts of the Jewish law in order to become righteous. But what they were doing was further distancing people from God. Today, the Christian church is facing a serious problem. There is a proliferation of ‘teachers’, ‘preachers’, ‘apostles’, ‘prophets’, ‘healers’, ‘evangelical shamans’, ‘spiritual warriors’, ‘proponents of a gospel of prosperity’, among others, that are prostituting the churches, taking advantage of the ignorance that many believers have regarding sound doctrine. If Paul were to come alive again, he would treat the aforementioned with the same or greater severity with which he treated those of his time.

C. “Watch out for... those mutilators of the flesh”

With this expression, Paul referred to the rite of circumcision, which since Abraham’s time was an outward symbol and sign of having entered into a special relationship with God. Lastly, he calls them, the party of mutilation. William Barclay states: “There is a pun in the Greek which isn’t transferable to English. There are two Greek verbs which are very like each other. *Peritemnein* means to circumcise; *katatemnein* means to mutilate, as in Leviticus 21:5, which describes forbidden self-mutilation, such as castration. Paul says, “You Jews think that you are circumcised; but in fact you are only mutilated” (<https://www.studylight.org/commentaries/dsb/philippians-3.html>)

This sign, without a covenant of relationship with God, is nothing more than a castration or bodily mutilation. True worship is in the sanctuary of the Spirit (John 4:20-24) and not in the flesh. Much of what is called worship today is nothing more than a carnal religion. This is a warning voice of the danger of falling into the forms of a well-crafted religious worship while having a heart far from God. We can still have correct doctrine and feel proud of it, but not have a true relationship with God. Or even we can love and trust the external symbols and emblems of religion, yet let go of God's work in our minds and hearts. In this way, we too could be mutilating the body of Christ.

Questions:

- Who were the Judaizers calling "dogs"? Why?
- Who did the apostle Paul call "dogs"? Why?

II. The fallacy of religious heritage (Philippians 3:3-6)

Was there ever a Judaizer who enjoyed the privileges of a legacy like that of the Apostle Paul?

A. Ritualism

Paul said of himself that he was "circumcised on the eighth day" (v.5a). Like every Jew by birth, this apostle had been subjected to the rites established by his ancestors; so, he was circumcised by his parents as a baby. This wasn't the case with some Judaizers who were proselytes, that is, Gentiles 'converted' to Judaism. Therefore, Paul was saying: "I am a Jew by birth" (MacArthur, John. Commentary on the New Testament, Philippians, Colossians and Philemon. USA: PORTA-VOZ Editorial, 2012, p. 228). But, religion which is imposed or learned, however good it may be, doesn't make us new creatures. Similarly, circumcision without new birth is just a small operation. Paul had to give up his religious legacy when he trusted in Christ for salvation.

He turned the concept of circumcision on its head by saying: "For it is we who are the circumcision" (Philippians 3:3a). In this regard, Clarke said: "We who have embraced the Christian faith have entered into the new covenant..., glorifying ourselves...in Christ Jesus, as our only Savior, having no confidence in the flesh, in any external rite or ceremony prescribed by the Jewish institutions" (Clarke, Adam. Commentary on the Holy Bible, volume III, New Testament. USA: CNP, 1976, p. 510).

B. Being part of a certain race

Also, Paul added of himself the following: "of the people of Israel" (v. 5b). Once again, the apostle Paul emphasized his kinship bond with God's chosen people. He was a descendant of Abraham, Isaac and

Jacob, an inheritance in which the Jews, together with the circumcision, believed would save them (Clarke, Adam. Commentary on the Holy Bible, volume III, New Testament: CNP, 1976, pp. 228-229). However, Paul had to renounce that mentality and accept that salvation is only by grace, through personal faith in Christ Jesus.

It's a privilege to have been born into a Christian home, or to have received a highly disciplined moral formation with sound principles! But if we're not born again, we won't be able to enter the kingdom of God (John 3:3). Each individual, in each generation, must make a personal decision regarding Christ.

C. Being part of a religious elite

Likewise, Paul indicated that he was "of the tribe of Benjamin" (v. 5c). This tribe was united to the tribe of Judah. He could boast that he belonged to the pure Jewish race that had preserved its ethnic identity after deportation (Henry, Matthew. Matthew Henry's Biblical Commentary. Spain: Editorial CLIE, 1999, p. 1700). In Paul's time, many Jews had lost a lot of their identity to the point that they didn't know which tribe they belonged to. This was a result of intermarriages during the years of the exile when the people of Israel had blurred the tribal lines.

However, Paul's family had preserved their ethnic purity as descendants of Benjamin, which placed Paul on a higher level than many of the Judaizers. However, he had to accept that neither the privilege of being a descendant of God's chosen people, nor the social level, nor anything else, entitled him to the kingdom of God. Salvation isn't obtained by inheritance or tradition, but by personal faith in Jesus Christ: "...no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again" (John 3:3). God doesn't have grandchildren, He only has children, and to be a child of God, you have to be born again.

D. Tradition

Another attribute that Paul mentioned about himself was: "Hebrew of the Hebrews" (v.5d). This servant of God had the satisfaction not only of having been born in the best religious cradle, but also of having reached adulthood having remained faithful to the orthodox traditions, language and customs of their ancestors. He wasn't a Hellenic Jew, incorporated into the Greco-Roman culture, as many Judaizers of his time were. Rather, he was a Jew of pure race and birth (MacArthur, John. Commentary on the New Testament, Philippians, Colossians and Philemon. Spain: Editorial PORTAVOZ, 2012, p. 230). But all of this that he had loved so much, and that he still valued, couldn't make him in a child of God, so he had to renounce his most precious traditions in order to trust only in Jesus Christ.

Questions:

- Explain what the apostle Paul meant when he said of himself that he was “a Hebrew of the Hebrews” (v. 5).
- What would you say to people who believe that they are saved by being born into Christian homes or being part of Christian generations?

III. The fallacy of replacing Christ with human achievement (Philippians 3:7)

Who could display a better ‘curriculum vitae’ than the Apostle Paul?

A. Religious education

Paul said that he was, “in regard to the law, a Pharisee” (v. 5d). He was educated according to the most rigorous demands of the Jewish religion, reaching the highest level of devout and legalistic Judaism; that is to say, the level of dying for it. But not even his status as a Pharisee, a scholar in theology, or member of a sect could entitle him to the kingdom of God (MacArthur, John. Commentary on the New Testament, Philippians, Colossians and Philemon. Spain: Editorial PORTAVOZ, 2012, pp. 230-231).

According to the On-line Dictionary, the word ‘religion’ comes from the Latin *religio* and was originally used to mean reverence for God or the gods, careful pondering of divine things, piety. (<https://www.google.com/search.religion>). Religion alone cannot bring us to God because but it’s impossible for man to regain his relationship with God on the basis of his own effort. We’re saved by grace, not by works (Ephesians 2:8-9). Jesus said to a prominent Jewish teacher: “You must be born again” (John 3:7b).

B. Religious fervor

Another attribute that Paul mentioned about himself was the following: “as for zeal, persecuting the church” (v. 6a). In the life of Saul of Tarsus (the former name of Paul), religion became a disease. This led him to hate and kill those who didn’t think like him. A zealous Jew was one who loved God and hated what offended him. Saul’s jealous but poorly focused love led him to hate and persecute Christians, from his participation in the martyrdom of Stephen until he devastated the church by going house by house, dragging out men and women and putting them in jail (Acts 8:3). His zeal for God led him to try to eradicate Christianity in a relentless, ruthless and cruel way. He was so sincere in his religious beliefs, and in what he did, but he was wrong (MacArthur, John. Commentary on the New Testament, Philippians, Colossians and Philemon. USA: EDITORIAL PORTAVOZ, 2012, p. 229).

C. Spotless morality

Finally, Paul expressed that he was, “as for righteousness based on the law, faultless” (v. 6b). All those who knew Paul could attest to his irreproachable conduct. He was quite an honorable and exemplary gentleman. He had devotedly and rigorously complied with all the ritualistic and legalistic demands of Judaism. But later, he was able to recognize his inner state and cry: “For I don’t do the good I want to do, but the evil I don’t want to do—this I keep on doing... What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body that is subject to death?” (Romans 7:19, 24).

The irreproachable external morality doesn’t entitle a person to Heaven either. Philippians 3:7 says: “But whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ.” Paul had to stop trusting in his own religious achievements, citing them as rubbish, in order to throw himself into God’s grace (Ephesians 2:8-9). So, all highly educated, cultured, and pious sinners need to trust Christ for salvation.

Questions:

- Do you consider that a religious legacy (inheritance) can be of help or hindrance in trusting Christ? Comment.
- Do you consider that the achievements, in matters of religion and morality or other aspects of human life, can constitute a hindrance to good relationships with others and in our relationship with God? Comment.

Conclusion

One of the concepts of religion says that people need to build their own staircase to God. But self-effort won’t succeed. There is only one ladder that God has provided for salvation: Jesus Christ, who is “... the way, and the truth, and the life ...” (John 14:6). How many people who are morally blameless, sincere, and honest in their beliefs today need to understand that one thing is missing, they need to give up the things they have been trusting in and begin trusting fully in Christ.



We Have to Lose to Win

Elvin Heredia (Puerto Rico)

Passage to Study: Philippians 3:7-11

Memory Verse: "But whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ" Philippians 3:7.

Lesson Aim: To understand that accepting Christ in our life implies making changes in character and values to have a new life in Christ and a better relationship with God.

Introduction

Who could have boasted of religious and legalistic merits better than Paul? In Philippians 3:4-6, we find the ideal life curriculum for any member of the Pharisees, the most disciplined and strict religious sect of Judaism. Paul came from the tribe considered the purest in Jewish identity, the tribe of Benjamin, and from which Saul, the first king of Israel, had come (1 Samuel 9:10). Certainly according to the criteria of the law, Paul was a worthy representative of the highest religious class of his time. His service, his character, and his executions in defense of the law were unimpeachable.

But something powerful happened that day that Paul (formerly called Saul of Tarsus) was on his way to Damascus (Acts 9). He had an encounter with the Lord Jesus which changed the paradigms and life criteria of that powerful man. That encounter with Jesus Christ was a transcendent event in Paul's life, just as it was and is for us today, because it poses the same change in life parameters. Only this encounter with Christ can change our life. That was my case, and surely, it's yours too, just as it was for Paul.

Now in a very articulated way, Paul seems to establish a pattern of how his life was radically changed in Philippians 3:7-11. This structure of circumstances was outlined in elements of the past, present and future. Let's analyze this structure and derive from it what the Apostle Paul himself discovered about his own life, and what this could mean for us now.

I. What we must lose from the past (Philippians 3:7-8a)

The apostle Paul, after making an inventory of his attributes, gains and human and religious achievements, immediately identified them as losses. This didn't mean that he had discarded or erased those acquired merits from his life, but he transferred them under a

new concept, under a new category. The encounter with Christ marked in the life of this man a past and a present. As he himself referred to it in Ephesians 4:22, it was about putting off his "old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires." For Paul, the things he cherished so much in the past had really turned into vices and distractions that deceived him and led him astray from the true path of grace.

Now, Paul used the word 'loss' to describe all those things that he gloried in the past. According to the definitions provided by the Greek about this word, we can identify the following:

- a. Apoleia (death, expiration). For the apostle Paul, all the glories of the past and those merits of which he could boast before were now dead and buried for the sake of Christ. The loss of all those things represented for Paul a death of the flesh, in order to live constantly in the knowledge of Christ.
- b. Chásimo (failure, deficit, red numbers). The result of a successful commercial operation are fixed costs and greater profits. For Paul, everything he had acquired in the past had come to count as a waste of time and an activity without interest. In Christ, all of his human and religious efforts ended in failure.
- c. Zemía (injury, damage or detriment). That is to say that for Paul, the things that he believed in the past to be reliable and reasons for glory were now useless for him, and they also became detrimental in his relationship with God. Those were things that hindered and were detrimental to the perfect development of the Christian life. Paul came to consider all these things as garbage (from the Greek *skybalo*, manure, or excrement) (obtained and adapted from Glosbe; and retrieved from <https://es.glosbe.com/es/el/puesta>)

In the same way, we must consider as rubbish all those things from our past life that can become harmful distractions for our relationship with God. William Barclay comments about the apostle Paul in the following passage: “Everything human had to be deposited in order to accept the free grace of Christ. He had to divest himself of all claims of honor in order to accept, in the most complete nakedness and humility, the mercy of God in Jesus Christ” (Barclay, William. *The New Testament commentary*, volume I-Philippians, Colossians, I and II of Thessalonians, Argentina: Editorial La Aurora, 1973, p. 70).

Anything from our past that represents a detriment, or a deceptive distraction, for our relationship with God must be discarded as trash, or as things that no longer have any value, as we put all our faith in Christ Jesus.

Questions:

- What other meanings can we attribute to the words “loss” and “garbage” in the context of the Philippians 3:7-8 passage?
- What attributes and merits of the past that have seemed important reasons of pride to us today should we discard?

II. What we must gain in the present (Philippians 3:8b-9)

After leaving behind the useless values of his inventory of things of the past, Paul justified without remorse his new attitude. Paul concluded that everything which he thought would get him to Heaven were really preventing him from entering. He had come to a solid conviction about what he had found in Christ. Paul discovered that his entire past life had been a mere and futile attempt to achieve the righteousness and peace that he could only find in Jesus. He found that the law and its precepts were useless to achieve the righteousness that can only be obtained by grace and faith in Christ (v.9). Paul couldn't achieve peace with God by human or legalistic merits, since human effort doesn't lead us to Heaven. So, Paul had to lose to win. He had to abandon the idea that self-sacrifice would lead him to God, and instead he accepted the sacrifice of Christ for his salvation.

The apostle Paul's example reminds us that we too must lose to win ... lose all our useless inventory of worldly values, hypocritical religiosity and false holiness, in order to reach, as Paul himself said, the excellence of the knowledge of Jesus Christ (v.8).

It's interesting to note that the apostle didn't attribute to himself a full knowledge of righteousness and faith in Christ, rather, his expression implies a constant search for more of that knowledge. In fact, Paul himself

indicated that he still didn't claim to have achieved that perfection, but for that reason, he continued to the goal, “to the prize of the supreme call of God in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 3:12-14). Paul shared with the Philippian Christians, that he didn't claim to know God fully.

This is true for us today. We must continue to get to know Him more and more. Paul is suggesting here that we must assume an attitude of constantly seeking to gain more in the grace of the gospel, while at the same time continuing to throw away everything that limits us from obtaining spiritual gain.

This seems to present us with an interesting dynamic in the life of Paul. As he got rid of all the useless self-acts to achieve grace, he was also gaining knowledge and perfection in his relationship with God. There is no doubt that this must also be a constant dynamic for us. Dying to the flesh and living in the Spirit should be daily practices. We must convert that relationship of loss and gain into a lifestyle.

Now, as this dynamic pointed, and points today, towards something greater and more glorious, Paul projected the effects of losing in the flesh to gaining in grace toward the future expectation of the fulfillment of a great promise.

Questions:

- What was the attitude that Paul had toward constantly growing in his relationship with God?
- Why should we assume a similar attitude?

III. What awaits us in the future (Philippians 3:10-11)

Finally, Paul shared his future expectations regarding his relationship with God. For this apostle, knowing Christ completely meant the final and ultimate meeting in glory. This is what he understood in I Corinthians 13:12, when he spoke of the preeminence of love saying: “...now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.”

Paul always understood the fullness of his relationship with God as something partial and incomplete on this earthly plane. His hope rested in that time when the love of God in Christ Jesus will be manifested in the final consummation of our salvation, when we will know God fully, as He now knows us. In the end, our relationship with God and our knowledge of Christ will be full and complete.

Paul expected the perfection of the knowledge of Christ through the resurrection of the saints. In this sense, he highlighted our participation in the sufferings of Christ (Philippians 3:10) as the attitude that will make us similar to Him in his death. Here, Paul spoke of our obedience as an act of sacrifice for Christ. Our obedience to Him must be like his obedience to the Father. The apostle indicated to us in Philippians 2:8 that Jesus, “being found in appearance as a man, ...humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross!” Paul longed to be considered obedient to death for the sake of Jesus Christ and the gospel. Let’s remember that when Paul wrote this letter, he was a prisoner in Rome, so he was aware that in the near future he might be reaching the prize of that supreme calling in Christ Jesus. Paul lived in his own flesh the sufferings that made him similar to Christ.

We must share Paul’s consideration regarding our relationship with God. The resurrection of Christ isn’t merely a fact of the past, it’s the guarantee of our future if we remain faithful in the present. Likewise, Christ’s resurrection wasn’t only His victory, but it was a promise and model for ours. Paul didn’t regret the loss of all those things past because he had found a better way. He was losing everything to gain in Christ everything

that he could ever want or be. He was burying the junk from his past life in order to flourish in his new life in Christ, full of the fruit of the Spirit. He had to die to live. He had to lose to win.

Questions:

- How did the apostle Paul understand what our knowledge of Christ is while we’re in our human condition?
- What is the implication of the resurrection in terms of the perfection and totality of our knowledge of Christ and our relationship with God?

Conclusion

Today, we’re called to lose to win. We must discard from our life everything that doesn’t add value and connection to our relationship with God, to grow daily in the experience of the Christian life. Losing our past, we gain in the present the grace that can only be obtained through faith in Jesus Christ. This also implies obedience to God’s commands, even if doing so means participating in the same sufferings of Jesus in his death. If we remain faithful to the end, we will have a glorious future, where the power of the resurrection will be manifested in us.



Pressing On to Achieve Our Goal

Jessica Nogales (Spain)

Passage to Study: Philippians 3:12-16

Memory Verse: “Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already arrived at my goal, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me” Philippians 3:12.

Lesson Aim: To learn how to remain steadfast in our profession of faith, practicing Paul’s three suggestions that will help us reach Heaven.

Introduction

In John Bunyan’s classic book, *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, written in the 17th century, we find the main character Christian on his pilgrimage to the Kingdom of Heaven. Along the way, he encounters several difficulties which discouraged him. However, with wise actions and God’s direction, Christian manages to reach his desired prize, the heavenly city.

When Paul wrote to the church at Philippi, he did so from prison in Rome. He was nearly ready to hand over the ministry to others and had his eyes on finishing the race (2 Timothy 4:6-7). He encouraged his readers to continue faithfully along the path of salvation until reaching God’s final call. He encouraged them to be faithful. Let’s analyze the three suggestions Paul gave to the Philippians.

I. Don’t live on past spiritual experiences (Philippians 3:12-13)

The Christian life must be lived out on a day-to-day basis. We may all have our own spiritual curriculum, but if we think that what we have achieved in the past, or any hierarchical ecclesiastical level we may have reached, will convince God, we will be mistaken. What is happening in the immediate present is what really counts. In other words, if we don’t have a right relationship with God now, the catalog of ministerial service that we have had will be of no use to us.

The apostle Paul said: “For we are the circumcision ...” (Phil. 3:3); and emphasized this: “... those who in spirit serve God and glory in Christ Jesus, having no confidence in the flesh” (v. 3). The Pharisees boasted of their past and their religious experiences. For them, works were like stepping stones that allowed them to be closer to God without caring about true spirituality. They interpreted physical acts as part of their CVs, and for this reason, they considered that they already were bound to go to Heaven. However, the apostle Paul wanted his readers to

not have false illusions. So, in case there was a Philippian brother or sister who thought this way, he refuted this idea by citing his own experience: that ideology affirming of himself: “Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already arrived at my goal...” (Phil. 3:12a).

The apostle had a lot to brag about which he listed in verses 4-6. Paul had been circumcised, belonged to the tribe of Benjamin, had blamelessly kept the Jewish law, he had been a zealous Jew, etc. As a compliant and careful Jew, he was at the top of his class, but that didn’t entitle him to feel perfect, or to think that he had already achieved anything.

In the Christian life, there are also many who think that they already know everything, or that they have experienced everything. This is a mistake. Religiosity and conformity can only make us feel good. God is a God of newness. He says in His Word that His mercies are new every day. He has everything each of us needs daily (Lamentations 3:22-24).

Paul taught the complete opposite of spiritual conformity. He said: “... but I press on ...” (Philippians 3:12). The spiritual life is about growth, moving forward, continuing to advance, and doing even better things for God. In the Christian life, no one ought to feel they have arrived, no matter how many years they have served in the church. We cannot live on past experiences, since all they do is produce repetitive religiosity.

Likewise, the apostle taught us two secrets to continue having a continuous spiritual life. First, each one of us must ‘press on’: “to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me...” (v. 12b). That must be our greatest reason to hope for a better tomorrow in our spiritual lives. One day Christ knocked on the door of our hearts, and we invited him into our life. Now we live with Him every day, not just once a week. Every time we open our eyes at dawn, there is a new opportunity to have fellowship with Jesus Christ.

Secondly, we don't have to live in the past. We need to forget what is behind and strain toward what is ahead (v.13). The past may be a hindrance to our future because it impedes us from enjoying spiritual riches day-by-day. Perhaps this is the reason why we don't see adequate growth in our spiritual lives.

Therefore, we need to forget our past. Yesterday has passed and today God has something fresh for us. As bitter or sweet as yesterday was, we shouldn't linger, but press on. God wants to teach us new things in our lives, so, we have to turn the page. Let's make a commitment today to give up yesterday and ask God to renew every area of our lives.

Questions:

- What are the religious experiences that the apostle Paul had as part of his "curriculum"? What did the apostle say about it in Philippians 3:12a?
- Do you think that some past spiritual experiences are hindering your spiritual growth?

II. There's a heavenly goal and prize to achieve (Philippians 3:14)

The spiritual life implies persistence. At the very beginning of the church we see the disciples devoting "themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer" (Acts 2:42), and every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts (Acts 2:46). Perseverance is key to growth and to reaching our goal. For Paul, "achieving the goal" began from the time he met Christ, and from that moment on, he began to abandon everything that hindered him (Philippians 3:7-8). He claimed that there were material things or achievements that he abandoned for the supreme reason of attaining the excellent knowledge and love of Christ.

As Christians, we must always look to the final line, just as great athletes do. To achieve this, we will have to renounce many things in order to achieve the prize of Christ. On another occasion, Paul wrote to the Corinthian brothers to tell them that those who run or fight in the stadium do so for a corruptible prize. We must do the same, but our prize is incorruptible. We must put our humanity in bondage so as not to be eliminated on the last day (1 Corinthians 9:24-27).

In Acts 2 we see that the early church was strong because it persevered. They persevered in making disciples, in unity and fellowship, in commemoration of the Lord's Supper, in spiritual gatherings, in prayer, and in praise and witness. These practices are vital if we want to continue to achieve our long-awaited final goal. Paul

wrote to the Philippians: "I press on toward the goal" (Philippians 3:14a). However, it's valid to ask what was the goal? Paul's aim was to "press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus" (v. 14b). So, he wanted to achieve what God had called him to do.

Philippi as a city had a great privilege. The Roman emperor had annexed this city, as a favorite part of the empire, above other cities and because of this, all the Philippians obtained Roman nationality. Humanly, the Philippians were privileged because of their Roman citizenship. Keeping this idea in mind, Paul talked about citizenship of a heavenly city (Philippians 3:20-21). Spiritual citizenship must be our reward beyond any other earthly citizenship. There is no greater prize that we can achieve, for this award cannot be compared to anything material. In one of His parables Jesus made this point. The Kingdom of Heaven (the prize) is like a priceless pearl, and whoever finds it must do everything possible to buy it (Matthew 13:45-46). Paul also teaches us that in order to have that ultimate goal and prize, our priority must be Christ, and everything else must be secondary.

Questions:

- According to Acts 2:42,46, what must we do to achieve the final goal?
- What is your goal?

III. Hold fast to the advance you have made in Christ (Philippians 3:16)

Everything that we have done in the past confirms the distance traveled, and that the only relevance of the past is to help us continue maturing in Christ. Past experiences shouldn't be what we live on, but they can bear witness to how far we have come. An anonymous proverb says: "Use the past as a springboard, and not as a sofa." Nothing happens by chance; everything has worked to receive the grace of God. Each of us have been Christians for different number of months or years, but all our experiences haven't been by chance. As hard as the road has been, we're now in a better place to increase our faith and continue to find God's favor.

Just as in the case of biological life, maturity is progressive and we need to go through different stages. Paul wanted to make us understand, through Philippians 3, that the spiritually mature must build upon the progress achieved (vs. 15-16).

Everything that happens to us works for good in each one of us who loves God, and this will help us to win the prize, as we studied in the second point of our lesson. Building on our advancement in Christ must be for two main reasons.

In the first place, the apostle Paul didn't want his readers, the Philippian Christians, and us, because of the privilege of having his letter to teach us today, to end up in the flesh, after having advanced with the Holy Spirit. To counter this evil, Paul gave us many recommendations of which we will only list seven of the most important.

1. Our love needs to abound more and more (Philippians 1:9).
2. We must stand firm in one mind and in the Lord (Philippians 1:27, 4:1).
3. We must do nothing out of contention or vainglory, but act humbly (Philippians 2:3,5-8).
4. We need to occupy ourselves in our salvation with fear and trembling (Philippians 2:12).
5. We shouldn't follow the example of bad workers (Philippians 3:2).
6. We can take all requests to God in prayer (Philippians 4:6).
7. We should use our minds to think about excellent and praiseworthy things (Philippians 4:8).

Spiritual life is very fragile. We can appear to be very spiritual in what we do, but that may just be intentions, or worldly attitudes. Only God sees the intentions of the heart. That's why the Pauline recommendations appeal to love for God and for neighbor, and not to be carried away by the false and selfish desires of the heart. Bad attitudes will only push us back in our spiritual lives. Hence, Paul exhorted the Galatian brothers: "...Are you so foolish? After beginning by means of the Spirit, are you now trying to finish by means of the flesh?" (Galatians 3:3). Communion with Christ, following His example and lifestyle, will help us advance, but on the contrary, carnality will only make us lose our heavenly objective.

The second main reason to keep holding on to the advance we have made with Christ is that if we neglect Him and take our eyes off Him, we can fall backwards away from God. Worldliness is one of Satan's tricks to stop us and prevent us from achieving the end for which Christ saved us.

In the Bible, we have examples of those who professed to have faith, but the love of the world stopped them, and they fell into deception. Hence, they lost the spiritual race. In the Old Testament, we find the story of the liberation of Lot and his family from the fire that fell on Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 19). On this fact, Jesus warned us: "Remember Lot's wife" (Luke 17:32). She was the only one of the four who wasn't saved because she didn't value her path towards her salvation, but her bad actions were fatal for her. Paul said to the Ephesians: "Be very careful, then, how you live—not as unwise but as wise..." (Eph. 5:15).

Another example in the Old Testament is the case of the people of Israel who escaped from Egypt. Having seen the mighty hand of God helping them cross the Red Sea, once they got to the other bank, their faith waned. Therefore, they didn't hold fast to the great advance they had made. Numbers 13 shows us how the people of Israel fell into depression, wanting to return to Egypt because they had been told that there were giants that could kill them (Numbers 13:32-33). Unfortunately, their incredulous and disobedient attitude received a fatal punishment ... God didn't allow them to go into the Promised land. They died in the desert.

In our spiritual life, we will find many challenges to face. We shouldn't face them in our own strength. We need to fight them with Christ's help. We need to believe Him. He has said that He will be with us until the end of the age (Matthew 28:20). We need to feel His hand guiding us as we advance into the heavenly kingdom (Philippians 4:13).

This recommendation wasn't followed by Demas, one of Paul's collaborators. In letters to the church at Colossae (Colossians 4:14) and to Philemon (Philemon 24), Demas is mentioned as a servant of Christ. But in the last letter written by the apostle Paul, Demas was described as a brother who deserted for love of the world (2 Timothy 4:10). This disciple of Paul didn't finish his spiritual career and didn't achieve the heavenly prize.

Questions:

- What is the use of everything we have experienced in the past?
- Do you feel that you have advanced in your spiritual journey?
- Share some ideas about how God can continue to help you grow in grace.

Conclusion

When Jesus knocked on the door of our heart, He did it to enter and live each day with us. But the big day will come when we will see Him face-to-face. Meanwhile, we should listen to Paul's advice to not live only on past spiritual experiences. Set out to reach the goal, the heavenly prize; and hold on to the advancement made in Christ.

Passage to Study: Philippians 3:17-21

Memory Verse: “But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ” Philippians 3:20.

Lesson Aim: To understand that our citizenship, as children of God, demands the practice of a dignified lifestyle that honors the Lord and His church.

Introduction

Foreign persons can be recognized immediately because they speak, dress, or behave differently. Many years ago, large caravans of foreigners arrived in our city, Guatemala City, and for several weeks, they parked numerous motor homes at a large site. The curious children would go out to walk among those houses and see the visitors. It was something new, since they were so different from us. They had their own customs and lifestyle that clearly differentiated them.

This also happens with Christians because we have been called by God to be holy and shine with the light of Christ in the midst of a world that sinks into darkness more and more (Philippians 2:15). This holy calling is what outlines our lifestyle as children of God. The apostle Paul spoke of this in detail in his epistle to the Philippians. Let's study the instructions that Paul gave to this church.

I. “Join together in following my example” (Phil. 3:17)

Imitation is a learning method. Since we were little, we learn from those around us. But not all the models we see are worthy of imitation. Thus, sadly, there are vicious or irresponsible parents, leaders, artists, and renowned figures, with lives riddled with immorality, who negatively influence the lives of others. They act in ways that aren't in accord with the principles of God's Word. Even in church circles, there are people who assume wrong attitudes such as pride, arrogance, or superiority, as if they were better than others. Paul challenged this group of Christians to make firm decisions about their new life in the gospel.

A. “Follow my example” (v. 17a)

What sort of person should we imitate? In the verses that precede Philippians 3:17, the apostle Paul had shared with the Philippian church the fact that, within Jewish society, he had been a socially accomplished

man, enjoying power, prestige, and authority. After his personal encounter with the Lord Jesus Christ (Acts 9), he surrendered his life totally, was transformed, and was willing to leave everything to please the Lord. Paul loved Jesus Christ with sacrificial love. On many occasions, he suffered contempt, violence and even prison. He was in prison when he wrote this epistle.

When Paul asked them to follow his example (Philippians 3:17), he was referring not just to all he had given up, but also to his constancy and persistence in preaching the gospel, although it brought him serious problems.

Many times, people deny Christ when they are faced with difficulties. Paul was characterized by being a humble, obedient person with a fervent desire to please the Lord. His is an example worthy of imitation.

Perhaps we find it somewhat presumptuous that Paul has set himself up as an example, but in 1 Corinthians 11:1, he also made the same challenge: “Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ.” The certainty of doing what was pleasing to God gave him firmness and confidence in launching such a challenge to the beloved Christians of Philippi. Can we say the same, without our conscience accusing us of something that we must correct in our life? You may need to change attitudes toward family or other people.

It's so easy to imitate bad examples. However, as children of God, what a great responsibility we have on our shoulders since we have the duty and the privilege of being a good example to those around us. We have no idea how many people are watching how we live. Our life must inspire them to remain faithful to Christ. We need to reflect on how we're conducting ourselves before others. We don't want to be the cause or the excuse they give for not walking in God's will.

B. "...keep your eyes on those who live as we do" (v. 17b)

Paul had the sanity to recognize that he wasn't the only one whose life the brothers and sisters were to imitate. He also recommended to them to take note of other Christians who had exemplary lives. Today, while the lives of many people aren't worth imitating, there are still Christians who live according to the light of the Word and let the Holy Spirit direct them. So, they too can inspire us to follow the Lord in obedience and faithfulness.

Ask your students to think for a moment and remember some exemplary Christians they know. Maybe they weren't perfect, but their conduct was/is irreproachable in relation to their families, the church, the good use of finances and other such matters.

We need to subject each area of our lives to the scrutiny of the Holy Spirit and the lordship of Christ. God is the only one who can transform, perfect, and guide us into all truth. Being a good example every day is every Christian's responsibility. Through our lives, the Lord will carry the transforming message of the gospel to those who need to be saved. We need to focus our attention on those who conduct themselves like Jesus taught us. We cannot waste time justifying ourselves for not living like them, or criticizing other people who aren't living correctly.

Questions:

- What behaviors should we avoid and which should we Christians imitate?
- Do people follow your example?
- Is there something you need to correct in your life? Comment about it.

II. Beware of the "enemies of the cross" (Philippians 3:18-19)

Paul warned the Philippian Christians about the danger of those who are "enemies of the cross" (v. 18b). These people caused a lot of harm and pain to the apostle's ministry, and also to the Lord's church. They weren't seeking God's honor, or the good of the church, but the satisfaction of personal interests. Paul was really troubled about these false teachers. He remembered their actions "even with tears" (v. 18). Paul felt he needed to warn this young church to be wary of these teachers.

The apostle's pain was what we also feel when people in whom we have trusted, in whom we have believed, whom we have helped and from whom we would not expect acts of disloyalty or treason, betray God and us. It's so painful! These people have little regard for the sacrifice of the Lord Jesus Christ when they decide to live in a way contrary to biblical principles.

They're the same kind of people who don't care about the dire results that their actions may provoke, or whom they may hurt or cause to fall. They don't consider the present and eternal effects of their conduct because they're only thinking about material earthly things. These are the ones that from the beginning have been the cause of divisions and rebellions within the church.

Today we too have many enemies of the cross of Christ among us. Let's see who they could be:

- Those who are just religious:* this was the case of groups of Judaizers who, in many places, wanted Christians to complement the sacrifice of Christ with the rituals of Judaism. With those ideas, they caused a lot of confusion for new converts.
- False Christians:* those who sneak into the church to cause factions, or use a facade of Christianity to seek a position in which they can gain prestige, fame, power and perhaps money. They make the gospel a commodity for their personal benefit; they don't care about people. They're hedonists; their "god is their stomach..." (v. 19).
- Those who are hostile:* those who openly express their contempt for the gospel. They strive to find, at the earliest opportunity, errors to point out in Christians.
- Nominal Christians:* these are the ones who, if asked, say they are Christians. But they are only observers because they don't want to commit to God or His work. They may attend as visitors to the church.
- The backsliders:* if they are fallen from the faith, then they aren't Christians. These are the ones who were once Christians, but they are no longer. They have turned away from God and His Word. They live in rebellion and have become the worst critics and staunch enemies of Christianity.
- Those who believe they're Christians but don't "walk the talk":* their libertine behavior contradicts their testimonies. They live dissolutely, with lawsuits, anger, dissent, adultery, vices and other sins; and therefore, they are a source of disrepute and a stumbling block to the Lord's church.
- The legalists:* These place excessive emphasis on external aspects such as the length of dresses, hair and other things, hindering others from reaching the feet of Christ.
- Carnal Christians:* these know the norms of the new life in Christ, but they don't live according to them, but according to the impulses of their carnality. They are self-centered, gossipy, rude and angry.

Verse 19 is very clear about these people: "Their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame." We need to honestly evaluate our lives to be sure that we aren't in any of the aforementioned groups because the end of enemies of the cross of Christ is perdition. Let's not delude ourselves into believing that God will overlook the offenses and damage done to His church.

In contrast, there are also authentic Christians who, although they may not have reached a high state of spiritual maturity, have consecrated their lives to the Lord Jesus Christ and have consecrated their wills, allowing the Holy Spirit to govern their lives in a way that is pleasing to God.

Questions:

- Who are the enemies of the cross of Christ? Why?
- How can we avoid becoming enemies of the cross?

III. "Our citizenship is in heaven" (Phil. 3:20)

The Philippians had a privileged position in the Roman Empire for they were exempt from paying taxes, and enjoyed the privilege of being Roman citizens, of which many were proud. Ask your students to reflect on the following: Where do you originate from? What are the cultural and language characteristics of your place of origin? How do you distinguish yourself when you get to another place?

When people migrate to first world countries, many end up living in neighborhoods that are dangerous, messy, and dirty. This, of course, is a somewhat unfair generalization as not all emigrants end up like this. There are also many who contribute with honest work to the development of those countries where they reside, contributing significantly to the economy and to the improvement of their families. Therefore, all citizens must strive to be a source of honor for their countries.

True Christians have a heavenly citizenship that demands exemplary conduct from us that won't discredit the Lord or His church. We're blessed to be able to live differently from the precepts of the world, Jesus said that we are in the world, but we're not of the world (John 17:14-16). We're not guided by the flesh but governed by the Holy Spirit. By shedding the old nature, we have put on the new one. We don't take liberties that put our salvation and that of others at risk, or act according to our whims, without first consulting the Lord. We're not impulsive, but govern our emotional reactions by the self-control with which the Lord has equipped us. We also try to please God in the way we live our lives in every detail.

We have a reverent fear of the Lord, even in the intimacy of our thoughts. We avoid being a stumbling block to others or hindering them in accepting Christ. We're not greedy, but follow the ethical code of the gospel, not only in appearance, but of the depth of the intentions of the heart. We take care not to project a distorted image of Christianity. We don't tell dirty stories or participate in bad conversations that corrupt good habits. We also don't use abusive, dishonest, or malicious words, because we

don't want to grieve the Spirit of God. Christians must live in holiness, waiting for the Second Coming of the Lord.

I remember how my father, who loved traveling, often accompanied the District Superintendent in visiting churches in different places. On the day they were due to travel, my father would get up very early as always, but eagerly. He would go out again and again to the door to see if the Superintendent had already arrived. Just as my father looked forward eagerly to his trip with the Superintendent, we need to look forward with joy to the coming of the Lord. Those who don't live as citizens of the heavenly kingdom may have their joy curtailed from fear for Jesus' return.

In many countries, you have to have a passport or a visa to enter. However, we must live holy lives to enter the kingdom of God (Hebrews 12:14). We shouldn't expect to get to Heaven unless we conduct ourselves worthy of our heavenly citizenship.

Questions:

- What are the characteristics of those who have heavenly citizenship?
- Do you distinguish yourself by living as a citizen of the Kingdom among those who aren't? Why should we cultivate such characteristics of the Kingdom today?

IV. Christ will "...transform our lowly bodies" (Phil. 3:21)

We experience trials, abandonment, loneliness, pain, sadness, misunderstanding, lack of support, disloyalty and all kinds of unpleasant situations. The circumstances of the current world project a dire future: disintegrated families, crowded churches where few teach sound doctrine, a polluted world, global warming, the cooling of relationships with God, etc. That is to say, a permissive society in which an even greater decline is seen with routes to destruction.

Our congregations suffer from many of the problems that cause despair and anguish, but in the midst of so much trouble, the children of God look forward and long for the Lord's coming with joy, because we know that He will still do great things for His children. The Lord will transform our bodies so that they will be like His own glorious, risen body, which won't weaken, age, get sick, or die. The Lord can do this because all power has been given to Him in heaven and on earth (Matthew 28:18).

Questions:

- When will the transformation of the body of a child of God take place? Do you consider yourself ready for the above? Comment.

Conclusion

Let's live in holiness to please God, aware that we aren't citizens of the sinful world, but of the kingdom of Jesus Christ. Let's take care that our behavior corresponds to that of a heavenly citizen, and let's wait in holiness, with joy and longing, for the return of our Lord and Savior.



Rejoice in the Lord Always

Mirelys Correoso Calzadilla (Cuba)

Passage to Study: Philippians 4:1-7

Memory Verse: “Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!” Philippians 4:4.

Lesson Aim: To understand that we can live a full life in Christ in whatever circumstance.

Introduction

The apostle Paul's epistle to the Philippians could have been a complaining missive permeated with misgivings about the consequences of his ministerial life. Paul could have zoomed in on the fact that he was paying a high price as a champion of the gospel since this letter was written when he was imprisoned in Rome because of his service to the Lord. But to the contrary, Philippians is the letter that evokes joy and perseverance. It's a song to the fullness of life in Christ and to the privilege of living in Him and for Him.

The apostle Paul exhorts us in this epistle to consider qualities and attitudes that we Christians must assume; the same ones that are implicit in the fruit of the Holy Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23). This fruit is the evidence that the Spirit of God dwells in us because we are called to be filled with Him (Ephesians 5:18). So, if we are depressed, discouraged, disappointed, if it seems to be a hard struggle as servants of Jesus Christ, if we feel tired or despondent, we need to read this wonderful epistle, especially Philippians 4:1-7, where we will find new energy to continue in the way of the Lord.

I. “Stand firm in the Lord” (Phil. 4:1)

In this letter, the apostle Paul expressed himself with a moving tenderness, calling his Philippians brothers and sisters “my joy and crown” (v. 1). He's expressing here his joy that the fruit of his effort, his missionary work in Philippi, has been fruitful. Obviously in this city, there was a church fighting the good fight of faith that he wanted to instruct and encourage. Because of this, Paul encouraged them to remain firm. He often made this exhortation, since he knew the narrowness of the path that leads to eternal life. The one who said that to die is to gain, and living only made sense through service to Jesus (Philippians 1:21) knew that the life of Christ's disciple was a journey without return, full of spiritual opposition and where each pilgrim had to

transit through various tests. However, God's servants can build confidence by looking to the invisible Master, confident that he'll see the Lord's goodness here in the land of the living (Psalm 27:13), and at the end, receive the final reward in Heaven.

Therefore, this passage of Philippians exhorts us to stand firm in the Lord as a way of life, to persevere in our faith. In terms of civil constructions, the pavement is the permanent surface material that sustains pedestrian and vehicular traffic on a road or path. This paving must have three basic characteristics: i) Be waterproof to prevent rain from damaging the base of the firm; ii) Maintain a firm and suitable surface for circulation. If the road surface is slippery or bumpy it can be dangerous for circulation; and iii) Resistant to heavy loads in daily traffic.

We can compare this to our spiritual life. We, the children and servants of God, are anchored to Christ an immovable rock. There must be that solid pavement built by the Holy Spirit, capable of resisting everything that goes through our life. Vehicles, pedestrians, loads and heavy rains are elements that typify those attacks that the enemy puts on our lives, those tests that God allows, and that bring about the fight between the flesh and the spirit. We must stand firm without slipping. We must prevent those cracks which could permeate our faith (James 1:2-4; 1 Peter 1:6-7, 5:8). We are called to remain firm; keeping our eyes on Jesus, the author and finisher of the faith (Hebrews 12:2), and obeying the Comforter no matter what happens. To achieve this purpose, we must make use of the spiritual disciplines that our God has provided for our spiritual strengthening and growth, such as prayer, daily Bible reading, fasting, restitution and forgiveness, among others.

Questions:

- What elements can affect the steadfastness of our faith in Christ?

II. Helping people who work for the Lord (Philippians 4:2-3)

Already in Philippians 4:2, Paul has exhorted the believers to have the same mind as Jesus, implying some sort of differences between the members. Here we see a situation that Paul wants to deal with. Philippians 4:2 says: "I plead with Euodia and I plead with Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord." He's asking them to come to an agreement about something. Then the apostle asked someone he trusted, whose name he doesn't mention, "to help these women" (v.3). He called this brother a "true companion," Because of this way of expressing himself, and given Paul's discernment, we know that he had chosen the right person for the task. Likewise, we can observe the importance that the apostle conferred to resolving the problem. He used the expression "to plead with". Having knowledge of the person of Paul, we can infer that he intended this co-worker to work as a good mediator and peacemaker.

Always within the diverse people who serve the Lord, there will be differences of characters, criteria, projections and approaches. But what unites us is much stronger than our differences: We have the same Father, Spirit, Redeemer, the same faith, baptism and same Great Commission entrusted to all the disciples by our Master (Matthew 28:16- 20; Ephesians 4:4-6). Also, bonds of love and gratitude to the Lord unite us. If we continue to list everything that unites us as God's people, we will realize that there is no room for disunity (Ephesians 4:1-6). Therefore, each of us is called to be a facilitator of harmony and peace within the church (Psalm 133; Hebrews 12:14).

In Romans 12:5, the apostle Paul said that "in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others." In Romans 12:13, the apostle indicated that we are to supply the needs of the saints and be hospitable.

We know that in this world we will have deficiencies of all kinds. Therefore, it behooves us to show love. We can do this by interceding for each other and ministering to each other with words of encouragement. Likewise, spiritually stronger brothers and sisters must support the weak, without belittling or minimizing them (Romans 15:1). If someone stumbles and falls, we must restore them with a spirit of meekness (Galatians 6:1).

But let's not forget that our Master ministered not only spiritual bread of life, but also bread to satisfy physical hunger (Matthew 14:13-21), equivalent to anything we lack materially. In Matthew 10:40-42, Jesus

promised us rewards if we help His disciples. Likewise in Matthew 25:31-46, Christ equated the act of helping others to doing it to Him. When we unconditionally help others, manifesting love and kindness, the fullness of the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives becomes evident in us, making us more like Jesus.

Questions:

- Within our diversity as God's people, what unites us?
- How can we help people who work for the Lord?

III. "Rejoice in the Lord always" (Phil. 4:4-6)

The word "joy" is mentioned several times in this letter to the Philippians and it's also one of the nine qualities of the fruit of the Holy Spirit mentioned in Galatians 5:22-23. Joy is the second quality, after love which is the first.

In Philippians 4:4, there seems to be an abundance of rejoicing. We are to live fully and in victory in Christ. In the midst of any circumstance, we must remember and live the Pauline warning: "Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!" Paul was sharing his own experience. The same city of Philippi was the scene of what prayer and praise could do; imprisoned in a Philippian jail, he and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God at midnight (Acts 16:25-26).

To enjoy Christ is to live day after day a life full of joy and satisfaction that isn't conditioned by the changing circumstances of daily life. Our lives are based on the eternal truths that make us more than conquerors. But how can we live with joy when on this earth we will have afflictions, adversities and events that will affect us emotionally? In Matthew 6:34, Jesus alerted us to the futility of worry and anxiety. He reminded us of how special we are to God, even more important than plants and animals. Think of how much more He will do for us, created in His image and likeness.

Christ put zeal as the opposite of faith. The Master affirmed that God knows what we need, and concluded that our main concern should be focused on seeking the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and then He will add what we need (Matthew 6:33). Likewise, our Lord invited the hard-working and burdened to come to Him to find rest (Matthew 11:28). Paul meant it when he said "do not be anxious about anything" (Philippians 4:6). The term "not anything" excludes the possibility that there is something that can take away our joy and faith when we put our burdens in the hands of the Lord and wait on Him. If we believe in the promises that our Lord has proclaimed for His people, there is no room for unease, restlessness, and worry. If Christ is in our boat, we can pass through the storm with stillness, patience and joy, because we have the certainty of victory with Him.

Questions:

- How can we live a life with joy?
- What did Christ and the Apostle Paul say about the rush of life?

IV. Praying with thanksgiving (Phil. 4:6)

The apostle Paul reminds us in Philippians that we have various means of grace, and one of them is prayer. It's an invaluable provision and privilege that the Father grants us, to be able to speak to Him without intermediaries and in complete freedom (Hebrews 4:16). This means of grace enables us to be intimate with our Creator, to seek His guidance and His forgiveness. We know that we can cry out with the certainty that we'll be heard, and that the one who listens (Christ) has all the power to supply our needs. Hence it follows that there is no room for anxiety. Prayer is also an essential spiritual discipline to be able to persevere in faith and grow spiritually.

The apostle here is speaking to us about the attitude that we must assume when praying. Verse 6 says: "Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God." We need to let go of all arrogance when praying, recognizing the majesty and authority of the person to whom we are addressing.

The apostle Paul also added that we should pray with thanksgiving, which he repeated to Christians in other churches (Ephesians 5:20; Colossians 2:7 and 4:2; 1 Timothy 2:1). When we consider all He has done for us, we must approach Him with immense gratitude for what He has done, is doing, and will do for us.

We must recognize that we're not worthy of His attention, but through His immense love and mercy, we can confidently enter before His throne of grace. Our need and urgency to ask for what ails us should never make us forget our gratitude to the Father. We can do this by expressing our gratitude in words of praise, but even mute by offering Him our hearts. He will perceive our transparency in this regard. Christ said vain repetitions won't conquer the Father's heart (Matthew 6:7); but rather a contrite and humble heart is what He's looking for. God will always respond to sincerity (Psalm 51:17).

This affirmation was born from the experience of someone who was a worshiper of God, to whom he showed his love and gratitude.

Questions:

- What are the benefits of using prayer as a spiritual discipline?
- What does it mean to ask God "with thanksgiving"?

V. Experiencing the peace of God (Phil. 4:7)

In Philippians 4:7, Paul says: "And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus." This peace is an essential part of the fruit of the Holy Spirit that dwells in us. Paul described this peace as incomprehensible to human reason, but accessible to those who seek it.

In his vast ministerial life, the apostle had experienced persecution, attacks, abuse, treason, imprisonment, and many other afflictions, but he knew how to find the peace of God in all of those circumstances. Therefore, he had the ability and desire to communicate to the church that this quietness of spirit can be achieved in every situation, no matter how adverse it may be.

Paul announced a promise full of encouragement and hope, affirming that this peace of God will keep the hearts and thoughts of faithful believers in Christ Jesus. Centuries before, the prophet Isaiah proclaimed through a song of confidence in the protection of the Lord: "You will keep in perfect peace those whose minds are steadfast, because they trust in you" (Isaiah 26:3).

We will have to give an account to our Lord for what we think and feel. In the Bible, the heart is illustrated as the place where our emotions are concentrated. We are encouraged to look after our feelings, since life flows from them (Proverb 4:23). It's comforting to know that the children of God can access the peace of God, which will preserve our emotional, relational, spiritual and mental health during our walk as pilgrims on route to eternal life.

Questions:

- What blessings come when we have peace as a fruit of the Holy Spirit?
- What is the relationship between peace, emotions and thought?

Conclusion

Paul urges us to have a full life in the Lord, even in the most difficult circumstances. To do this, he advises us to remain firm in God, be in unity with love and kindness, helping those who work for the Lord, and always being joyful in the Lord. As we wait in our Redeemer, there is no need to be anxious but persevere in prayer, with thanksgiving, believing in the promise that the perfect and complete peace of God will preserve our mind and heart in Christ Jesus.



Devine Mindfulness

Francisco Borrallles (Mexico)

Passage to Study: Philippians 4:8

Memory Verse: “Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things” Philippians 4:8.

Lesson Aim: To discern the impact that thinking has on our lives, and decide to focus our thoughts on obedience to Christ in order to enjoy full communion with God and with our neighbors.

Introduction

Continuously in our daily life, we are surrounded by an immense amount of information, which, whether we are aware of it or not, affects us, impacting us in various ways. It may even have an impact on our relationship with other people, as well as on our attitudes towards a specific situation.

This information comes from sources of various types such as radio, TV, music, news, talk shows, images, etc., which we receive mainly through our ears and eyes. Most of the time, this information is focused on generating impulses that directly affect our thinking, and of course, they affect and may be the cause of many of our reactions, conduct and/or our decisions.

Frequently we pass the time listening to something, or paying attention to certain issues which may have serious consequences on our conduct and decisions.

Ask the class:

1. What do you think about during the day?
2. Does what we think about govern our actions at different times?

We must be aware of our ability to choose what we hear and what we think about because what we listen to, what we think about and what we focus our attention on will shape our lives and behavior. We, the children of God, have a responsibility to focus our thinking in accordance with what the Bible teaches. That way, our thinking will shape our conduct according to our Heavenly Father’s will.

Say to your students: “For a moment, don’t think about anything; clear your mind of all your thoughts” After a minute, ask them: “Could you do it? Could you stop thinking?” Ask them to share their experience.

I. “...Think about such things”

God put in each one of us the ability to think so that we can generate ideas, reflect on different situations, find solutions to problems that plague us daily, etc. Thought is something inherent in us human beings. We need to think. Each of the aspects that we will analyze in the following points of this lesson will be focused on the precept “think about such things.” We’ll analyze the implications of what we think about as God’s children.

Our loving Father tells each of His children to “think about such things.” We can control our thoughts. To make it easy to imagine, let’s imagine the voice of God saying to us: “My little children, for your own well-being, think of these things that I have told you about.”

We can also imagine the disappointment of our Lord if He should hear us say: “Lord, I cannot think of good things; there is always some ugly and unpleasant thought in my mind.” If something similar is happening to you, let’s go to the Word of God.

God doesn’t want us to stop thinking (which would be the same as turning our minds blank). What the Bible counsels us is to be sober, moderate, lacking in superfluous things, even in our thoughts. The most direct way to start this practice is found in 2 Corinthians 10:5 where we read: “. . . We take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ.”

When a false, dishonest, impure thought comes into our minds, we shouldn’t try to fight it using our own abilities, but simply occupy our minds by thinking of something that is pleasing to God, giving Him our rational worship, and thereby obeying our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

II. “Whatever is True”

On many occasions, sometimes due to a bad habit, we allow thoughts which are not true to come into our minds. These false thoughts could be about a person, about a particular situation, or even about our personal relationship with our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. For example, we may think that a certain person has done something wrong. This thought could be caused by something you heard or were told, but has not been confirmed.

Fake news is ‘all the rage.’ But it’s wrong to accept gossip or slanderous talk just because we have received this information. God’s command is direct: Only think about “whatever is true.” So obviously, we must discard all false thoughts, and replace them with what is true. Reconsidering the initial example, a true thought could be the following: “That person who is saying things about me, regardless of their attitude towards me, deserves my respect; and even more, I, as a child of God, must show them love and pray for God’s blessing on their lives as Jesus taught us” (cf. Luke 10:27).

We must be sincere and discerning for what is false or true. In obedience to the Word of God, we need to distinguish between the false and the true in this world. The Bible can be our guideline on how to always think about “whatever is true”.

Questions:

- Together with the class, complete the following comparative list of true and untrue thoughts.

True Thoughts	Untrue Thoughts
Example: Christians are children of God	Example: God hasn’t heard the plea of my heart.

III. “Whatever is Noble, Whatever is Right.”

The on-line dictionary defines *noble* as: “having or showing fine personal qualities or high moral principles and ideals” (google.com/search-noble). God is asking us to fill our minds with righteous thoughts. Romans 12:2 says: “Do not conform 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.

IV. “Whatever is Pure.”

The apostle Paul addressed Timothy with the following exhortation: “Don’t let anyone look down on you because you are young, but set an example for the believers in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith and in purity” (1 Timothy 4:12). If we have pure motivations,

pure thoughts, this will result in pure actions. In today’s world where sexuality is bombarded at us from the TV, the Internet, etc., we need to be very careful about what we think about or imagine sexually about another person. Remember the Lord said that just thinking about someone else sexually was tantamount to the sin of adultery (Matthew 5:28). No one can underestimate our example of purity in our spiritual life, and this includes showing love that is pure towards other people, even in our thought life.

Questions:

- Ask for examples of thoughts directed toward something noble, right and/or pure. Encourage your students to analyze and comment on how this type of thinking influences their daily lives.

V. “Whatever is Lovely.”

It’s very evident or obvious that a kind thought will have multiple benefits, both for those who conceive it (exercising their ability to choose what to think about), as well as for those we are thinking about. When our thoughts are kind, they show that we are wise. If we always look on the better side, believe in people, and trust others, we’ll be peacemakers as well as enjoying positive thoughts and personal joy and peace. James 3:17 says: “But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere.”

A kind thought immediately will fill us with peace that will be evident in our interaction with other people. We will be able to give thanks to our God for their life and for what that person represents for us. Therefore, let’s be kind and make sure that everything we do bears witness and is lovely in the eyes of God and other people.

VI. “Whatever is Admirable.”

The on-line dictionary defines *admirable* as “arousing or deserving respect and approval” (google.com/admirable). So, here Paul is exhorting his readers to think of things which if everyone could hear our thoughts would arouse respect or approval. We’re deeply affected by our thoughts and reactions. If our thoughts are admirable, this will spill over into our actions, day by day.

So, the mandate of God, expressed through Paul, is that we think of everything that is capable of having a positive effect on our lives, of everything that motivates a habitual and direct disposition to do good. Thinking like this will bring us peace and shield and protect us from bad and impure thoughts, keeping us within the will of God. Remember what Matthew 15:19 says: “For out of the heart come evil thoughts—murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander.”

VII. “if anything is excellent or praiseworthy”

Let's begin the analysis of this particular point assuming that at a specific moment, there is a certain thought in our mind for which there will be two options: a) it's directed towards ourselves; or b) is directed at another person or situation.

If we consider the first option, we must think about ourselves in a positive way. We need to make good choices; for example “I propose in my heart that from this moment on, I will serve God faithfully through my gifts”; or “I assume the commitment to live in conjugal fidelity to my spouse.” These thoughts in themselves would be positive and will influence our whole being, and they would be preparing us or predisposing us to do the right and worthy thing. This sort of thinking would be both excellent and praiseworthy. And it would influence our actions.

Now, let's consider the second possibility, when the thought in our mind is directed towards another person (or towards some situation alien to us, but directly or indirectly related to our person). An example of praiseworthy thinking in this context would be as follows: “All the media report the obvious economic crisis that is passing in the country. But in my case and that of my family, God's grace has been evidently manifested at all times and in all places. Therefore, even in the midst of the crisis, I will continue to trust in the Lord. I will bless His holy name, since every day the God of our salvation fills us with benefits.” Glory to the Lord!

This is a praiseworthy thought too. Of course, we have received a blessing in itself, since we can see God's care over us giving us good provisions for everything we do. Thinking like this gives us the correct vision and direction we need to continue moving forward in all matters of our daily life without giving up due to the conditions around us.

Imagine the impact our words would have on other people when they have been derived from praiseworthy thoughts. Of course, they would be words of blessing that would speak of God's favor and mercy towards those who seek Him with all their hearts.

Questions:

- What are the steps we must take to obey God in our thinking according to the content of this lesson? (Philippians 4:8)

Conclusion

If our thoughts are wicked, our actions and our lives in general are much more likely to be wicked as well. Therefore, we hold every thought captive in obedience to Jesus Christ, for in this way thoughts of blessing and peace will arise in our minds, and we will have the firm conviction that God is shepherding us “beside quiet waters”.



Christ is More Than Enough

Daniel Pesado (USA)

Passage to Study: Philippians 4:10-19

Memory Verse: "My God will meet all your needs according to the riches of his glory in Christ Jesus" Philippians 4:19.

Lesson Aim: To understand that God, through Christ, provides everything we need for an abundant and satisfying life.

Introduction

For many Christians, accepting some truth from God's Word without understanding how it applies to their lives is common. However, that wasn't God's plan and He doesn't expect this. We're responsible for receiving the light, or the spiritual knowledge, that we have. We are also responsible for seeking more of that knowledge in order to continually live a lifestyle that pleases God.

The Lord isn't satisfied with us 'simply' attending church, or just opening the Bible and reading it to fulfill a program; or praying with old and tired sentences. In other words, God wants much more than mere symbolic actions which are little more than gestures or appearances. To manifest sincere devotion to the Lord, we must be real. Our good God wants us to participate in true acts of communion with Him. We need to fight against everything which distracts us. We need to do our best. If we enjoy full communion with God, then His Word becomes relevant, it vitally refreshes our soul, and illuminates our understanding. It makes us better Christians, better disciples, and better representatives of God in our life circles.

Paul is a good example of someone who searches for God. He made sure that the church at Philippi realized that they needed to believe, and also to understand what he had believed, to live out the gospel with all that it implies. The apostle left us a written testimony, useful for the Lord's church, about the benefits of centering all hope in Christ.

I. Paul was full of joy (Philippians 4:10-12)

Perhaps we might imagine that Paul was happy because the Philippians had sent him an offering to meet his needs. But Paul's joy was much deeper than that. He was of course grateful that they had remembered him. Paul was gladdened because he depended on a God who keeps His promises. His joy didn't depend on circumstances; it was the genuine joy that only comes from God. Let's examine why Paul was able to feel joyful.

A. Because he could see that the fruit of his missionary work endured

Those who receive the gospel don't always remain faithful. It causes great pain and deep sadness to see some who one day knew the truth of God and experienced the joy and peace of salvation in Christ, and then the next day abandon the path and retreat into spiritual darkness. We often ask ourselves, "What else could I have done for them? Could I have offered them something better?" Those are questions that may not be answered now. In the case of Paul, he rejoiced and renewed his strength when he saw the Philippians' faithfulness.

B. Paul knew that his spiritual children loved him.

The Philippian church loved Paul, and because of that, they remained connected with the apostle and his ministry, even though the task wasn't done for their immediate benefit.

To have the opportunity to arrive and begin to serve among a group of unknown people who, at times, are even hostile to us or to the message, but later become part of our lives is a wonderful missionary experience. When they invite us into their homes and families share with us their struggles, laughter and tears, that is one of the greatest rewards for any Christian. Paul enjoyed the unmatched joy of experiencing the simple and genuine love of his spiritual children.

C. Paul was glad because God cared for him

Paul knew that God cares for those who trust and serve Him. This care doesn't always have to do with abundance, security or guaranteed health, although this idea is very fashionable in many Christian circles today. But in this passage, Paul gave a clear Christian life lesson on contentment. Verse 12 says: "I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want."

Questions:

- What were the causes of the permanent joy experienced by the apostle Paul?
- Is it easy to distinguish authentic and permanent joy from what is commonly defined as joy? Comment.

II. “I can do all this through him who gives me strength” (Philippians 4:13)

Paul recognized that service to God requires adequate equipment. The Bible presents us with descriptions of God's equipment or armor in different passages (Ephesians 6:10-19; 1 Thessalonians 5:8). This is necessary to take on the riskiest task in the entire universe: the fight against Satan and his host of evil. But it's also an enormously satisfying task to rescue others created in the image and likeness of God from the devil's jaws and help them enter the kingdom of heaven.

Philippians 4:13 is one of the best-known verses in the Word of God, yet many times, it's not used correctly. People often assume that Christ we will be able to do everything that is humanly impossible for us. As a child, Popeye was one of my favorite cartoons. I was fascinated to see how this character, by simply eating a can of spinach at the right time, could literally do whatever he imagined was necessary to defeat his enemies (especially his rival Brutus).

Unlike Popeye, Paul didn't think in terms of “spiritual spinach” to impose his will on any challenge. So, it's worth asking ourselves: how had the apostle been equipped?

A. To resist Satan's attacks

At various times in his life and ministry, this apostle recognized that, although disguised in multiple ways, the attacks always came from the same enemy: Satan (1 Corinthians 7:5; 2 Corinthians 12:7; 1 Thessalonians 2:18), also called the evil one (Ephesians 6:16), the god of this age (2 Corinthians 4:4). Undoubtedly, Paul emphasized Satan's power, cunning, and destructive purposes. But in Christ, the apostle Paul found the armor of God to resist him (Ephesians 6:10-20).

B. To complete the task commissioned by Jesus

The main reason Paul was imprisoned several times was for preaching the gospel (Acts 16:18-19, 2 Corinthians 11:23; 2 Timothy 2:9). This task involved challenging various levels of power and all kinds of enemies. However, his loyalty and dedication to Christ and to the preaching of the gospel were absolute (1 Corinthians 4:9-16; Philippians 3:8). His dedication was such that he was able to openly declare: “...I have fully preached the gospel of Christ” (Romans 15:19).

C. To reach the end of his life victorious in Christ

Knowing Christ face to face, seeing the face of his Master, that is, being with him always in eternity, was the stimulus that led Paul to assume and resist extreme dangers (2 Corinthians 11:23-30). But nothing separated him from his highest objective, which was to keep the faith and know Christ (Philippians 3:8-11; 2 Timothy 4:6-8).

Questions:

- Assuming that every Christian has a responsibility to serve and share Christ, what risks will we face if we try to get involved in this task without the necessary equipment?
- How can we avoid the risk of false security in relation to having the adequate capacity for service to God, the church and our neighbor?

III. Paul was completely satisfied (Philippians 4:14-18)

We all seek knowingly or unconsciously to be satisfied. We need to experience many other things, such as peace, loving and being loved, joy, security in times of extreme difficulty, company when we feel abandoned and alone. But the common indicator that some or all of these benefits are obtained is satisfaction. On the contrary, the lack of satisfaction indicates the inner emptiness due to the absence of those issues mentioned.

For the apostle, everything received from the Philippian brothers was a special source of satisfaction. But when was this and by what means and for what purpose?

A. In troubles (v. 14)

Since his encounter with the risen Lord Jesus on his way to Damascus (Acts 9), the life of the apostle Paul was an authentic adventure of faith. His full commitment and obedience led him to extremely dangerous circumstances (2 Corinthians 11:23-28) in which his life was in permanent risk (including being left for dead, Acts 14:19). In all these circumstances, the believers in the new church in Philippi zealously “shared in his troubles” (v. 14) and cared for him through financial support (Philippians 4:15b).

B. In his service for God (vs. 15-16)

Help offered when we are in full time service is very encouraging. But many other churches weren't so perceptive about Paul's needs. He had to live by faith. Faith is the first bond that led Paul to accept a challenge far beyond his physical, financial, intellectual, and even spiritual resources.

The Philippians showed how God moved through his sons and daughters, and they proved that God uses ordinary and limited people to join a mission of unsuspected scope. Their prayers (Philippians 1:19) and their offerings were continuous (Philippians 4:16). It's also very interesting that Paul spoke of "giving and receiving." Without a doubt, these spiritual children also benefited from this service relationship. This principle also applied to the apostle's relationship with the church at Corinth (1 Corinthians 9:11).

C. With disinterest and sacrifice (vs. 17-18)

It's possible to understand that the interest in this relationship between the apostle Paul and the church of Philippi was mutual. Paul had served as a spiritual father, pastor, and teacher to the Philippians. This congregation was born out of the first preaching in Europe, on the banks of a river where Lydia, a purple vendor, heard and believed the gospel (Acts 16:14-15). Subsequently, this textile businesswoman invited Paul and the brothers who accompanied him to stay at her home (Acts 16:15). It's easy to understand the relationship between gratitude and selflessness. This is how this relationship of mutual service arose. In a context in which personal interest often prevails over the common good (Philippians 2:21), acts of selfless service are undoubted proof of the effectiveness of the message preached and believed.

Although we can consider Philippi as a prosperous city, Paul recommended: "Be anxious for nothing" (Philippians 4:6); and especially, he referred to the offering sent as a "sacrifice," and to God's ability to provide for every need (v. 19). This apostle recognized here a fundamental Christian principle: without sacrifice, there is no offering (2 Samuel 24:24; Mark 12:41-44).

Questions:

- Name some areas of your life where you previously had dissatisfaction, but later, in Christ, you obtained full satisfaction.
- In your opinion, is there an area for the Christian where dissatisfaction is adequate or necessary? Comment.

IV. "God will meet all...needs" (Phil. 4:19)

Even when Paul was writing from prison, he gave yet another indication of his unshakable trust in the God whom he preached. How does God provide for our needs? Can His promises be a source of trust for us as disciples, in all circumstances?

A. God provides everything

Believing that God is creator and sustainer of everything is the basic foundation of our dependence on Him. We risk depending completely on Him because we trust him. This is the proof of His being near to us, of His knowledge of our situation at every moment, and especially of His loving care. This was the same confidence expressed by

Abraham at a critical moment of his existence, and key to the continuity of God's plan with his life; for Isaac was his only descendant (Genesis 22:13-14), and we can see this too in David (Psalm 23:1).

B. God provides according to His riches

God's provision and resources are unlimited, therefore, our trust in Him must be full. Our problem with the concept of a God providing everything necessary is that we mostly limit that provision to the material aspect. God continues to be the owner of his creation, and, as Paul said to Timothy: "...God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment." (1 Timothy 6:17). But James also warned: "When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures" (James 4:3), which implies that our search for God and his provision is often wrong.

Another aspect commonly promoted among Christians is that the limit to receive God's blessings is according to how much faith we have. However, the background revealed in Paul's life negates this principle. Because over and over, the apostle pointed to God's will as the key to having enough and experiencing true satisfaction (Philippians 4:11-12; 1 Timothy 6:6-8).

C. God provides in Christ Jesus

In Christ, we find what is necessary for a full and abundant life (John 10:10; Romans 8:32). When praying for the Christians in Ephesus, Paul asked God to "grant" them, "according to the riches of his glory..." (Ephesians 3:16a). The second part of the verse greatly expands the perspective of God's provision: "to be strengthened with might by his Spirit in the inner man..." (v. 16b; see also Luke 11:13).

Some of God's provisions, although not always taken into account, are perfect peace (Isaiah 26:3), help in times of conflict (Psalm 121), timely discipline (2 Corinthians 7:9-10; Hebrews 12:4-11), companionship in solitude and consolation in pain (2 Corinthians 1:3-7), wisdom (Ephesians 3:8-11), security when we lack confidence (Ephesians 3:12), among many other gifts.

Questions:

- Share some personal testimony that you experienced regarding depending only on God, which was the cause of victory and strengthening of your faith.
- How would you argue that the "good will of God, pleasing and perfect" (Romans 12:2) is the desire of God; And what goes beyond a temporary or material benefit?

Conclusion

As we study Philippians 4:10-19, we can recognize that "in Christ," God provided us with everything necessary for a full and abundant life, as well as for fruitful service and for unwavering and eternal hope.

The Work of Christ in the Believer: Colossians

Fourth Quarter

Walking Worthy of the Lord
The Greatness of Redemption
The Supremacy of Jesus Christ
Reconciled with God
Rooted and Built Up in Christ
Our Identity in Christ
The Freedom that Christ Imparts
Living as One Made Alive in Christ
A New Dress Code
Imperatives of a Successful Christian
Family Relationships
The Importance of Prayer
Crucial Advice



Walking Worthy of the Lord

Marco Rocha (Argentina)

Passage to Study: Colossians 1:3-11

Memory Verse: “...so that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God” Colossians 1:10.

Lesson Aim: To be motivated to walk worthy of the Lord.

Introduction

Begin the class by asking students what are the issues that they commonly pray about. Then write on the board those that are repeated or are more frequent. Conclude by highlighting the importance of praying for one another, not only for material or health needs, but also for spiritual strength and growth in the life of holiness.

The congregation in Colossae was made up mainly of people who had come out of paganism. After becoming Christians, they were having to face the influence of different doctrinal deviations from both pagan and Judaism religions. These heresies questioned the preeminence of the position of Jesus Christ and His saving work, and included, for example, the exaggerated importance of angels (to the point that some even worshipped them). The false teaching they were hearing about also referred to the observation rules about diet and which days in the calendar should be observed.

These teachers based their positions on a supposed special knowledge that they claimed to have. Because of this, the apostle Paul, after the usual cordial greeting usual to epistles (Colossians 1:1-2), continued with thanksgiving, describing the fundamental values on which the church in Colossae had been established, and detailed the reasons that prompted him to pray for this congregation. To delve more deeply into this apostolic prayer, we will analyze three main ideas: Christian hope (Colossians 1:3-6); the fullness of knowledge, wisdom, and spiritual intelligence (Colossians 1:9); and the life of holiness (Colossians 1:10-11).

I. Faith, love and hope (Colossians 1:3-6)

The first reason that led the apostle Paul to be thankful (v. 3) was the blessing of seeing how the fruit of faith, love and hope were expressed in the Colossian congregation (v. 4). These virtues are a central part

of Paul's theology. They are fundamental to the Lord's teaching and they need to be manifested in the church. Faith, love and hope are also mentioned by Paul on other occasions (1 Corinthians 13:13).

According to the Billy Graham Association: “The concept of faith in the New Testament expresses much more than a personal belief. It implies the loyalty and trust that the believer places in Jesus Christ as his or her Lord and Savior... Faith has two parts to it, and both are equally important. The first part is belief that God exists... The second part of faith is commitment—a definite decision not only to believe in our minds that Christ can save us, but to put our lives into His hands” (<https://billygraham.org/answer/can-you-give-me-a-simple-definition-of-faith/>). This is the sort of faith that Paul had learned that the Colossians were experiencing, a faith that implied obedient trust, that is, the entire consecration of those who sincerely desired to become good disciples of Jesus Christ.

Another virtue highlighted by the apostle was the love that the Colossians had for all the saints/believers (Colossians 1:4). Love, in this case, should be interpreted as an expression of God's holy love that enables His children to give it to others. Both love and holiness are part of the essence of God, and this becomes evident in the lives of Christians when they surrender their lives to Christ and walk in His love.

For the apostle Paul, in addition to faith, it was essential that love be expressed in the lives of believers. Because they were expressing love, Paul could identify them as saints and faithful brothers and sisters in Christ in his initial greeting. This expression of love contrasted to the love of the world as in the case of Demas in 2 Timothy 4:10. This love was for all the believers often expressed in hospitality and service.

In Colossians 1:3-11, Paul says that faith and love expressed by the Colossians were fruits of a hope kept in heaven. That is, they could be sure that there was an eternity that awaited them. The problems and conflicts of life can be faced differently when we keep in mind the goal towards which we are heading. The hope of the Christian isn't the hope of the world, which can be ephemeral and conditioned to a person's situation. This hope has Jesus Christ himself as its eternal foundation, who according to John 14:2 is preparing a place for us. So in this passage, hope is the main evidence that the gospel had reached the Colossians' hearts. There was hope because of the expressions of faith and love in which they abounded (Colossians 1:4-6).

Although the apostle wrote this letter from prison in Rome, that difficult situation didn't prevent him from being mobilized for thanksgiving and prayer upon hearing the news that virtues such as faith, love and hope were manifested in the Colossian church. Paul understood that just as embracing sin responded to a selfish attitude of the human heart, virtues such as faith, love and hope were the result of having made a commitment to the gospel of Jesus Christ. By the power of the Holy Spirit, their lives were being transformed as they were willing to follow the path of holiness until the end of their days. The apostle thus was demonstrating at the beginning of this apostolic prayer his sincere affection for the Colossians, his joy for the virtues found in them, and at the same time a desire that the virtues remain and abound more and more in them.

Questions:

- What does Christian hope consist of?
- What actions can we take daily that give evidence of our hope in Jesus Christ?

II. Knowledge, wisdom, and understanding (Colossians 1:9)

Paul's prayer that began with thanksgiving for the virtues found in the Colossians also expressed a request: that they be filled with the knowledge of the will of God in all spiritual wisdom and understanding (v. 9). In this petition, the apostle concentrated his prayer on the needs of the congregation at Colossae.

The first was that they fully know the will of God. This fullness of knowledge (Greek *epignosis*) refers to divine knowledge. It must be differentiated from human knowledge. The Beacon Biblical Commentary affirms that "divine knowledge arises from a reciprocal experience - knowing God and being known by God. . . . To be filled with the knowledge of His will (that of God), is to understand the purpose and end of the "mystery" of the incarnation and sacrifice of Christ" (Nielson, John

B. Beacon Bible Commentary, tome 9. USA: Beacon Hill Press, 1965, p. 391). To understand this concept in greater depth, we need to recognize the influence on the Colossians of one of the heresies that did the most damage to the church in its beginnings: Gnosticism (from the Greek *gnosis* that means "knowledge"). In his prayer, Paul asked the Colossians to find true knowledge, which comes by revelation from God through the manifestation of the life of Christ reproduced in every believer.

Spiritual wisdom and understanding is the way believers grow as Christians. Unlike the false Gnostic teachers, who promoted human effort, rituals, and intellectual development, the apostle reminded the Colossians that there is only one way to heavenly knowledge: Jesus Christ.

Everything we need to know about God has been revealed in Jesus Christ, our Lord. In this way, we can see that the will of God isn't something mystical. In addition to being rational, it's spiritual and can become real in a life guided by the Holy Spirit. Paul's prayer didn't emphasize what God could do for the Colossians, as is usually the case when believers make requests. Instead, the apostle asked the Lord that the Colossians discover for themselves what He wanted from them, and consequently, they could make the commitment to fulfill His will in concrete actions that reflect their Christian commitment in the power of the Holy Spirit.

Every day, in different parts of the world, believers glorify Christ with their holy actions, showing spiritual growth and the advancement of the work of the Holy Spirit in their lives. Like the Colossians, today's Christians must emerge victorious before the temptation of ritualism and intellectual knowledge, to find in Jesus Christ the full meaning of the Christian faith, and live in the power of the Holy Spirit as they grow in holiness.

Questions:

- What can we do to know God more?
- What is the difference between human and divine wisdom?

III. The life of holiness (Colossians 1:10-11)

The final reason why the apostle prayed for the Colossians was that they might walk worthy of the Lord, that is, in holiness. For Paul, the Christian life implied commitment and a disposition to please Christ rather than others. This meant that they needed to obey God in their daily lives and get to know Him more and more, living in the power of the Holy Spirit. This is the goal of the Christian life.

We must voluntarily surrender our lives to the Lord, consecrate ourselves and walk in holiness and righteousness, not by our own efforts, but by inspiration and fruit of the fullness of the Holy Spirit in our lives. In this regard, David McKenna states: "When the Spirit abides in us, the principle of Christ's "perfect love" is possible. When the Spirit speaks through us, the Word of Christ is heard. When the Spirit moves through us, the grace of Christ is made known. When the Spirit works through us, the glory of God is revealed" (Mc Kenna, David. *Wesleyans in the 21st Century*. USA: CNP, 2000, pp. 41-42).

To walk worthily comes through knowing God. The Colossians were able to please Jesus Christ as they incorporated spiritual habits and practices that strengthened them in their holy walk. In this regard, prayer, faithful Bible and congregational life are means that can help us grow in the grace of the Lord today.

Richard Taylor affirms the following: "The sanctified must act as such. Furthermore, this responsibility rests entirely with them. Although internal grace is sufficient to enable them, it's not an automatic mechanism of cause and effect. They must accept responsibility and give systematic and deliberate attention to this task, so that the experience is validated by ethics, and faith is translated into daily practice and in Christlikeness" (Taylor; Richard. *Exploring Christian Holiness*, volume 3. USA: CNP, 1999, p. 192).

Faced with daily challenges, one of the wisest decisions that we can make is to incorporate spiritual habits that are edifying for our lives. We must develop habits and customs that glorify Christ and result in a holy walk, worthy of the Lord. We must habitually examine our Christian walk in the light of the apostle's

words, questioning if we are really walking worthily as brothers and sisters. Based on the response we get, we can strengthen our Christian commitment by making decisions that bring us closer to God's will and not ours. Just as the Colossians had to learn to do the will of God, today we too can overcome the challenges of life by learning to depend on Him and to be empowered by His power to emerge victorious, walking as is worthy of our Master.

Nowadays, our prayers tend to seek divine intervention to supply material and physical needs. Paul's prayer directs us toward a more excellent way: the search for spiritual empowerment and growth in our walk, in holiness. As in the times of the Colossians, we believers are tempted to neglect different areas of our lives where we need urgently to pray for deeper commitment, strengthening the hope that we have, in the fullness of knowledge, in spiritual wisdom and understanding, and in the life of holiness.

Questions:

- What does it mean to walk worthy of the Lord?
- Share a list of concrete actions you will take this week to live worthy of the Lord.

Conclusion

We need to examine our Christian walk, to see if it's worthy of the Lord. ¿Are their decisions that we could make to be able to live according to the will of God? Today is the time to decide.



The Greatness of Redemption

Eudo Prado (Venezuela)

Passage to Study: Colossians 1:12-14

Memory Verse: "...giving joyful thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of his holy people in the kingdom of light" Colossians 1:12.

Lesson Aim: To understand the implications of our redemption in Christ.

Introduction

The great evangelist Billy Graham wrote: "I don't know anyone who has accepted the redemption of Christ and who has later regretted having done so" (Graham, Billy. *The reason for my hope*. USA: Nelson Group, 2013, p. 32). What a true and meaningful statement! Redemption grants full happiness to the one who receives it. The apostle Paul declared it thus: "Blessed are those whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered" (Romans 4:7).

The study passage for this lesson belongs to the doctrinal section of the letter to the Colossians (chapters 1 and 2). This small segment of just three verses contains an extraordinary doctrinal richness. Paul's beautiful prayer list for believers clearly shows Paul's great pastoral heart (Colossians 1:12-14). Likewise, pointing to the Christological emphasis of the epistle, this passage answers fundamental questions related to redemption in Christ: As believers in Christ, who have we become? What does it mean to be forgiven by God? What change has taken place in our relationship with sin and the world? And what are the implications of having been freed from the power of darkness and transferred to the kingdom of Christ?

Undoubtedly, the historical background of the letter has high exegetical value which needs to be considered. The combat of ideas stemming from the gnostic heresy of those times underlies Paul's statements here. He showed that those gnostic errors in relation to the work of Christ were insufficient. Certainly and undoubtedly, the work of Christ is complete, and the idea of redemption fully expresses such fullness. So, having taken this little look at our topic of study, we are now ready to consider it in its widest and richest sense.

I. Qualified to receive God's inheritance (Colossians 1:12)

A new panorama opens up for our lives when we believe in Christ. We begin to experience spiritual realities that were previously veiled to our understanding. One of them is the fact that we have been transformed from slaves of sin to heirs of God. In this passage, Paul was referring to an essential aspect of salvation. Redemption enabled us to have a filial relationship with God. This was one of his thanksgiving motives for believers: God made us His children by pure grace! (Colossians 1:12).

Paul, in addition to addressing in many of his epistles the social and religious implications of slavery, used the term figuratively to express his thoughts on the meaning of salvation (Romans 8:14-17; Galatians 4:3-7, 5:1). Redemption has lifted us out of the bondage of sin, enabling us to partake of the blessings of God that Paul designated here with the phrase, "the inheritance of his holy people in the kingdom of light" (Colossians 1:12).

The expression "who has qualified you" comes from the Greek *hikanó-santi*, which indicates that God, through redemption, qualified us for His inheritance. One can infer here the idea of adoption many times mentioned by Paul about salvation (Romans 8:17; Galatians 3:26-4:7). We are heirs of God because He has made us His children. The presence of His Holy Spirit in our lives is what gives us certainty about that filial relationship (Romans 8:16).

The text also refers to the nature of the inheritance: "...in the kingdom of light" (Colossians 1:12). This verse talks about our "share" of the inheritance (Acts 20:32; 26:18; Ephesians 1:11) as "holy people in the kingdom." The 'light' begins in the believer here, descending from the 'Father of lights' through Jesus, 'the true light', and is perfected in the kingdom of light.

The kingdom of light includes knowledge, purity, love and joy. Here it stands in contrast to 'the darkness' of the unsaved state (v. 13; 1 Peter 2:9). The word "light" indicates the area where the inheritance is enjoyed; and clearly, it refers to the sanctified life (1 Peter 2:9; 1 John 1:7). Redeemed children of God have full rights to enjoy their wonderful eternal heritage. The filial relationship and the inheritance begin in the present with the new life characterized by the love of God.

Questions:

- What is the inheritance that we qualify for?

II. Rescued from the dominion of darkness (Colossians 1:13a)

Another important concept that Paul establishes in this passage is that of salvation, as liberation from the power of darkness and sin. According to the first part of Colossians 1:13, God "has rescued us from the dominion of darkness." The gospel proclaims liberty for the captives (Luke 4:18). For the believer, this liberation is an accomplished fact on the cross. This means that Satan no longer has authority over us, for his yoke was broken once we came to Christ. The power of the kingdom of darkness was based on our inability to fulfill God's law due to our sinful nature. In our former state without redemption, Satan had legal authority over us, but once we were saved by Christ, spiritual captivity was ended.

Gnosticism was a collection of ancient religious ideas and systems which originated in the first century AD among early Christian and Jewish sects. The Gnostics emphasized personal spiritual knowledge. In Colossae, it would have referred to the spiritual captivity of an imprisoned spirit in an evil body. According to them, it was impossible to lead a holy life due to the corrupt nature of the body. But according to Paul, the body isn't the prison of the soul, but the temple of God. So, both body and spirit belong to God, and He must be honored with the totality of our being (1 Corinthians 6:19-20).

Furthermore, the Colossians believed that humans were subject to higher spiritual powers beyond the control of man. "Astrology was already developed, and it was believed that every human being is born under the influence of a star and that his destiny is already plotted. The Angels played an important role and there was a hierarchy of mediators, who among other things were also creators. To achieve reconciliation with God, it wasn't enough to venerate Christ but also these angelic beings. According to these teachings, Jesus had not been able to free himself, or all his messengers, from the power of the cosmic forces and had succumbed to the destiny outlined by them "(Carro, Poe and Zorzoli-editores. Biblical Commentary, Hispanic World, volume

21: Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon USA: Editorial Mundo Hispano, 1995, p. 267). Probably many of these false beliefs were significantly affecting the daily conduct of Colossian believers.

By not understanding God's truths, especially the scope of redemption in Christ, certain erroneous beliefs in the world can also affect us. A person may be literally enslaved to a belief, an attitude, or a way of thinking contrary to God's purpose. There are those, for example, who submit each of their days to the predictions of a horoscope, or they are guided by superstitions, philosophies, and human traditions that openly contradict Christian truths. It's worth remembering Paul's exhortation: "See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the elemental spiritual forces of this world rather than on Christ...in Christ you have been brought to fullness" (Colossians 2:8, 10).

We have already been freed from the power of darkness and sin. We must not submit to any belief, philosophy, or way of thinking contrary to the doctrine of Christ. The main guide of the believer is the Bible, and the Holy Spirit can help us to understand it.

Questions:

- What did the Gnostics of the time of the Colossians think about spiritual captivity?
- How can someone be spiritually enslaved today?
- What produced this freedom from darkness in your life?

III. Transferred to the kingdom of Christ (Colossians 1:13b)

Thus, we come to the final part of this beautiful lesson on the greatness of redemption. So far, we have seen two wonderful truths: Through redemption, God made us fit to share in His inheritance, and delivered us from the power of darkness. In this last part, Paul pointed out that believers have been "brought...into the kingdom of the Son he loves" (Colossians 1:13b). This is an extremely important truth.

"In the same way that the earthly conqueror transferred the inhabitants of the land that he had conquered to be his subjects, so God, in His triumphant love, transferred people from the kingdom of sin and darkness to the kingdom of holiness and light" (Barclay, William. Commentary on the New Testament, volume 11, Philippians, Colossians and Thessalonians. Spain: Editorial CLIE, 1999, p. 142).

This indicates, first of all, that we belong to the kingdom of Christ; for we were brought into God's kingdom (v. 13). We are now "no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God's people and also members of his household" (Ephesians 2:19). The Son, who is the only Begotten of the Father, isn't only the eternal object of the Father's love, but He's also the embodiment and expression of that love in His way of dealing with us.

Secondly, this change implies an ethical transformation. "Those thus transferred regarding the 'state', are also transformed regarding character" (Jamieson, Fausset and Brown. Exegetic and explanatory commentary on the Bible, volume II: The New Testament. USA: Baptist House of Publications, 2002, p. 513). The transformation effected by redemption enables us to conduct ourselves worthy of the gospel. The Colossian brothers and sisters were surrounded by a completely pagan culture, but they had to understand that the work of God in them was complete and perfect, and provided them with a new life. They shouldn't continue to consider themselves under the power of sin and darkness, for they had definitively been set free by Christ on the cross.

Redemption, in Roman times, explained how slaves could be emancipated when someone paid for their freedom. The last part of the study passage summarizes the work of Christ: "in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins" (Colossians 1:14). Redemption, here is related to the forgiveness of sins. Forgiveness is a work of God's grace. Paul said: "He saved us, not

because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit" (Titus 3:5). There was nothing in us that made us worthy of God's forgiveness, no merit of our own to achieve His favor. But He, in His infinite mercy, loved us in Christ. Quite rightly, Paul's prayer for the Colossians was that they could continually live in an attitude of joy and gratitude for redemption.

Redemption is a complete and final release from the power of sin. Now, we belong to a new realm of life that is the kingdom of God, whose membership implies living out our lives in true holiness.

Questions:

- According to what we have studied in the lesson, what does it mean to have been transferred to the kingdom of Christ?

Conclusion

Sometimes our way of life doesn't match up with our understanding of the work that God did in us through Christ. We live as if the greatness of redemption had not really occurred. Basically, Colossians 1:12-14 has shown us that God has constituted us as His heirs through redemption, and we have been adopted as children of God. He has definitively freed us from the power of darkness, and transferred us to the kingdom of Christ, to live a life of freedom, spiritual joy and moral purity.



The Supremacy of Jesus Christ

Claudia Vidales (Mexico)

Passage to Study: Colossians 1:15-20

Memory Verse: "The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation" Colossians 1:15.

Lesson Aim: To understand and experience the nature, power, supremacy, and ministry of Christ, and how this benefits us as believers.

Introduction

Being a Christian is an adventure, but who is a true Christian? Knowing about airplanes doesn't make a person a pilot. Knowing how to prepare a good broth doesn't make you a chef. Knowing how to nail something together doesn't make anyone a carpenter. And having heard about Christ doesn't make the listener a Christian. To be a follower of Christ is to be of Him, to know Him, and to live like Him. So through this lesson, we will learn more about Jesus Christ and this will deepen our convictions as disciples.

I. What is Christology?

Christology is "the doctrine or teaching of the church concerning the nature of Jesus, the Messiah of Israel and Son of God. We believe that Jesus Christ is human and divine; that these two different natures are united in one person, and this union is permanent and eternal; this includes: that in Jesus we have a complete and final revelation of God; the second is that in Him, the payment of all sin is possible and can be obtained" (Taylor, Grider and Taylor. *Beacon Theological Dictionary*. USA: CNP, 1995, p. 175). Christology leads us to two basic questions, which seem simple. However, they really are profound: "... What do you think about Christ? Whose son, is he?" (Matthew 22:42). Ask your students: Who is Christ? (Take a moments to think together about this).

Our way of seeing Christ is closely related to the way in which we have experienced him up to this moment. Let's start with a simple example: what is the natural landscape like? The answers will vary according to the different places visited. Personally, I the author of this lesson can say that the landscape where I am has mountains with giant rocks and desert plants and bushes with green tints.

While we remain on this earth, we can get to know Christ more and more, and become more like Him (1 John 2:6). Colossians 1:15-20 is a passage that gives us the opportunity to get to know more about Jesus and learn to walk in His footsteps. The study of Christology presents a whole universe of aspects to consider, of biblical passages to review, of diverse thoughts. But finally, this area of theology will lead us to want to be more like Christ, to reflect each day on His love, and serve him humbly, always seeking to live like Him.

Questions:

- Define in your own words what Christology is.
- Who is God for you?

II. He's the visible image of the invisible God (Colossians 1:15)

What is the difference between something visible and something invisible? This question may sound absurd. However, when speaking of Christ, we find that He's the visible image of God, who is invisible. It's through the Son that we can contemplate the essence of the Father (Kittel, Friedric and Bromiley. *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*. USA: Challenge Books, 2002, p. 696).

God revealed himself in the person of Jesus Christ, the second person of the Trinity. Jesus is the perfect manifestation of God. To understand what God is like, we have to look at Jesus. We can know and understand our Creator. Jesus is the portrait of God, he's the visible part (Barclay, W. *Commentary on the New Testament*. Spain: Editorial Clie, 1999, p. 766).

In Psalm 19:1, the writer said that creation declares the glory of God, and in Genesis 1:27, we find that mankind was made in His likeness. We can therefore affirm, that Jesus is the image of God.

This was shown by Paul in Colossians 1:15, where he states that Jesus is “the firstborn of all creation.” What does this mean if Jesus is God Himself in the Trinity? This could lead to some confusion. Did God create Jesus when He created the universe?

Christ is the visible image of the invisible God. He became visible to humanity when He came to Earth. The coming of Jesus was announced in the Old Testament. In Genesis 1:26, we find that God referred to himself in the plural in His act of creation. Many have seen in this the work of the Trinity participating in the creative task. There are many more elements that lead us to consider it like this.

So you may ask, ¿So, Jesus, the Son of God, was created and creator? Christ wasn't literally created. In expressing Jesus as the ‘firstborn,’ Paul is highlighting his supremacy, using the metaphor of families. What Paul is saying is that Christ is the most important one. Simply, He's not part of a list, He's everything.

The Lord, in His perfect plan, did everything that humanity needed to have a communion with His person. Through Him, the Father is shown; therefore, “... blessed are they that see not, and believe” (John 20:29). Many times, our own nature makes us want to see rather than believe, so God provided us with what we needed – being able to see Jesus Christ, who is our mediator with the Father, and who existed with the father eternally (John 1:1-4, 14:6).

Questions:

- If Jesus is the portrait of God, how do you see God?
- If Jesus is the visible image of God, how can we get to know God?
- What steps can we do to know Him better?
- What position does Jesus Christ occupy in your life? Comment.

III. He's the eternal Creator (Col. 1:16-18)

In Christ, all things were created, simply everything. “All things admit no exceptions, the material and spiritual and the powers are inferior to Christ and are under his will and dominion” (Howard and Taylor. Beacon Biblical Commentary. USA: CNP, 1992, p. 400). The Trinity was active in creation, as we mentioned earlier. The Trinity is eternal, everything else was created later. Referring to Christ, Paul wrote: “For from him and through him and for him are all things. To him be the glory forever! Amen” (Romans 11:36).

“The permanence of the universe resides much more in Christ than in gravity, the universe is Christ-

centered” (Robertson, A.T. Comment to the Greek Text of the New Testament. Spain: Editorial Clie, 2003, p. 528). In Christ, everything was created to praise His name. We have been created to honor and glorify Him. Jesus was the first to rise, and he didn't die again. With this, the redemptive plan was fulfilled.

Paul likened the church to a human body with Jesus as the head (Colossians 1:18). In the head, we find the source of ideas, intentions and emotions. The Son, Jesus Christ, has the preeminence because He's before everything and is supreme. The function of the human body is incredible. Nothing moves if the brain doesn't issue the order.

Furthermore, the head is irreplaceable; the brain, as an organ, cannot be transplanted. Therefore, the body becomes useless and powerless without the head. Similarly, it's by the inspiration of Jesus Christ that the church acts and lives. Barclay tells us: “the world is the creation of Christ; and the church is his new creation” (Barclay, W. Commentary to the New Testament. Spain: Editorial Clie, 1999, p. 767). Jesus Christ is the one who leads the church. He gave himself for us for forgiveness of our sins out of love; He's the head (Revelation 1:5).

Ask: If we are parts of the body of Christ, what are we doing to help the church grow and be healthy? How much do we depend on the head, our Lord? Sometimes, it seems that we act as individual entities. We don't allow ourselves to be led by the connection that unites us to Jesus, who is the head. We must always remember that our purpose is to do His will. How does our life reflect that we are God's creation? We must proclaim with our attitudes, character and decisions that the Lord is our Father.

Questions:

- If you are part of the body of Christ, what do you do to function as part of it?
- How do you depend on the head, who is Jesus Christ?

IV. He's a mediator (Colossians 1:19-20)

It's quite possible that most of us have had the opportunity to witness or experience reconciliation. Perhaps some of us have even intervened to reestablish the relationship between two people. A separation can be the cause of many factors. For reconciliation to happen, both parties must be willing to deal with the matter, although one of them takes the initiative. The person who helps make peace is the mediator, who is in charge of reestablishing communication and looking for alternatives to solve the conflict that generated the separation, always seeking peace.

Jesus is the mediator, the one who came to reconcile humankind with God. God, in His infinite love, sought this reconciliation (2 Corinthians 5:19). Jesus is both fully God and man. Here the divine part is highlighted, to carry out reconciliation achieving peace and harmony between us and God - that peace was possible through His death and resurrection. This was how He mediated peace between mankind and God, bringing us reconciliation with God. Our Lord Jesus had to suffer and die, making a payment for our sins. Then He rose again to eternal life, proclaiming victory over sin and death.

What was the purpose of this reconciliation? Barclay tells us: "Christ carried out his sacrificial work of reconciliation in order to present ourselves to God as sacred and irreproachable" (Barclay, W. Commentary on the New Testament. Spain: Editorial Clie, 1999, p. 768).

Reconciliation will lead us to live lives characterized by holiness. When Jesus announced his death (Luke 9:21-23), He mentioned the suffering He was going to suffer, and invited His disciples to follow His example and take up their crosses daily.

In our Article of Faith X, the following is stated: "We believe that sanctification is the work of God by means of which believers are transformed into the likeness of Christ" (Manual of the Church of the Nazarene 2017-2021, p. 26). Every day, we need to be more like Him. Jesus became man to enable us to get to know God, receive His forgiveness, and become like Him to testify to the world around us that doesn't know God.

Questions:

- Make a list of the virtues of Christ's character.
- As you finish the list, meditate and write how those qualities are reflected in your life, and in which areas you need to ask for help from God to be more like Him.

Conclusion

When we know Christ in a genuine way, and experience reconciliation with God, we will want to be more like Him. He becomes the most important focus of our lives. We will be transformed as we learn to obey Him. Getting to know God implies having a permanent relationship with Him, always longing to live in His presence. If we do this, we can truly say: "I am a Christian!"



Reconciled with God

Loysbel Pérez Salazar (Cuba)

Passage to Study: Colossians 1:21-23

Memory Verse: “Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior” Colossians 1:21.

Lesson Aim: To understand the reconciling work of God in us and the benefits that it provides for our present and future lives.

Introduction

Reconciliation is one of the greatest mysteries we find in the Bible. It's hard for some of us to understand that we have been transferred from darkness to light, that we were previously enemies of God. Our old life ended and we began a new life. These actions, which occur in the spiritual world, are not visible to the human eye, but they have a real significance for those who accept what God has done. Richard Taylor expresses it this way: “Reconciliation flows naturally and immediately. The new believer may not realize it, but by faith he has been adopted into the family of God” (Taylor, Grider, and Taylor. *Beacon Theological Dictionary*. USA: CNP, 1995, p. 577).

In this lesson, we'll look at the apostle Paul's clear teachings about the redemptive work of Christ, reconciliation, and how we can understand this as well as apply it to our daily lives.

I. Before, we were enemies of God (Colossians 1:21)

In this text (Colossians 1:21-23), Paul emphasized the redemptive work of Christ, and he began by explaining why we needed to be reconciled with God. Paul was speaking to the Christian community of Colossae, to believers in Christ, people who had experienced reconciliation in their lives. But they needed to understand what they had been before knowing Christ, and what they were after knowing Him. He started off by saying “once” referring to their past lives without Christ (Colossians 1:21). He was talking about a space of time when they had lived without Christ and were separated from God. The text uses two terms to state what they were during their past lives: ‘alienated’ and ‘enemies’ (v. 21).

This statement wasn't only relevant for that early church, but for all time. So, the believer's past life can be defined this way: before we became Jesus' followers, we were far from God and we were His enemies.

Colossians 1:21 gives us the reasons for this enmity. Paul tells the Colossians that they had been “enemies in” their “minds because of” their “evil behavior.”

This is the common situation of unbelievers. When we understand the situation without Christ, we can start to understand the necessity of the reconciliation that God offers us.

The Word of God speaks to us in Colossians 1:21 about what we once were. It's very healthy as believers to take a retrospective look at our previous lives, remembering from where we have come. This allows us to:

1. Value more the reconciling work of Christ;
2. Have a stronger appreciation of the time we live in now and how we should live in the future and
3. Be convinced that we must not fall back into sinful worldly ways.

Our past was one of sin, of actions that displeased God, what Paul called “the kingdom of darkness” (Colossians 1:13). In that kingdom, we were driven by laws of evil that governed our way of life, which we condemn today, and which we can say have already been crucified (Galatians 5:24). If we don't recognize our previous sinful life, our separation from God and that we were enemies of Him, there is no basis for repentance, and reconciliation would be null.

At this time, we suggest that you provide a few minutes for your students to write down some of the bad things they did before they knew Christ, and then they can describe how their lives are now. Then they can tear the paper up as a symbol of all that is left behind in their lives.

That life cannot have a place in the present. But if that should occur, it may be because the believer hasn't forgiven himself and continues to reproach himself for something he did, which Christ has already forgiven.

Or it may be that still in the present some sins, actions, or thoughts that were part of the past life are still reappearing which should have been initially buried in Christ.

Questions:

- What was our position before God before our conversion? Include some verses from Scripture to back up your answer.

IV. Now, we're reconciled with God and we're blessed (Colossians 1:22)

Reconciliation is born in the heart of God, and is brought about by the redemptive work of Christ, through his sacrificial death on the cross. Reconciliation is the result of atonement.

Reconciliation that Paul was explaining to the Colossians goes beyond personal sin and disordered lives because it has significance in time. It's closely related to what happened in Eden (man's disobedience, Genesis 3:23-24), the sinful life of men and women, and the church as a people reconciled through faith in Christ.

The way that God used to reconcile us with Him was through the death of his Son, who paid the price so that we could have fellowship with our Creator again. For this reason, rather than abounding in the terms of enmity, reconciliation is better defined as the new time of friendship that is established between us and God through the death of Christ (Romans 5:10-11).

Christ is the key person in all of this wonderful work. Paul defined it this way: "For there is one God and one mediator between God and mankind, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all people. This has now been witnessed to at the proper time" (1 Timothy 2:5-6).

The believer knows that he has been reconciled by the witness of the Word and the daily experience of communion with God. Let's look now at the blessings that come with reconciliation:

A. Friendship with God (Colossians 1:22)

The Greek verb *apokatalasso* according to the Vine dictionary, means "to reconcile completely (apo, from), more intensely, to change from one condition to another, so that all enmity is eliminated and no impediment remains to unity and peace" (Vine, W. E. Expository Dictionary of Words of the Comprehensive New Testament. USA: Caribbean, 1999, p. 1423).

This helps us understand that if we were once God's enemies, reconciliation fostered our friendship with God, and that's the current condition of the believer.

The reestablishment of friendship with God, as a fundamental point of reconciliation, operates daily in the life of every believer and is enjoyed by any man or woman who believes in Him (John 1:12). It's the basis of communion in the relationship with God, and the manifestation of His grace and mercy.

One of the most practical ways to exemplify this restored friendship is the love that the believer starts to feel for God. Taylor says: "Love grows as God is revealed in the heart by the Holy Spirit. Then an intimate friendship prevails, because the soul is 'in Christ'..." (Taylor, Grider and Taylor. Beacon Theological Dictionary. USA: CNP, 1995, p. 577).

Friendship with God can be seen in all the believer's actions, in how God supplies physical, material, spiritual and emotional needs. This goes from being subjective to being perceived daily. People give glorious testimonies that say things like, "After I became a Christian ...; since I've been coming to church ...; God healed me ...; God gave me a job ...; God restored my marriage ...; God freed me from things of the past ..."; etc. This is the visible result of reconciliation and friendship with God.

B. He made us holy and without blemish

Holiness in the life of the reconciled person is one of the glorious benefits of reconciliation. The reconciling work of God is present when we receive Christ in our hearts. The sin that separated us from God is forgiven, and we are justified by faith.

Reconciliation makes possible our free and sinless access to the presence of God, that is, free from adamic and personal sinfulness. But it doesn't give us free license to sin in the present; quite the contrary. This new experience helps us reject evil. Our obedience to His Word, because we love God, makes possible this state of holiness. Just to give an example: an alcoholic who converted to Christ was reconciled to God and forgiven of his sin. As a result, this person decided, due to a transformative experience that he received, not to ingest any alcoholic drink, but rather to experience something inside him that doesn't allow him to do what he did before.

The fact that God made us holy and spotless reveals glory in His redemptive work, but it does mean that we shouldn't continue to want to please our old self.

C. Free from accusation (Colossians 1:22)

The term used is 'blameless' (v. 22). Guilt is the product of man's enmity with God because of sin, but reconciliation brought as a benefit that we are free from what made us guilty. In other words, God canceled all of our debt to Him so that every human being who receives Christ is free from guilt and from all that separated them from God.

That guilt weighing on the unrepentant man and woman is what can lead them to hell. For this reason, when this benefit of reconciliation is understood spiritually, we can be sure that we have been called to be part of eternity with God and free from that which produces an eternity without Him.

Questions:

- Briefly explain reconciliation.
- Mention the blessings that come with reconciliation.

III. Keeping the faith and hope of the gospel (Colossians 1:23)

Notice that the apostle Paul began the letter talking about the Colossians' faith in Christ, which was founded on the hope of the gospel (Colossians 1:3-4). They were already recognized for that, yet Paul didn't miss the opportunity to reaffirm it in Colossians 1:23. The reconciling experience with God remains effective if the believer remains in the faith, that is, if we maintain our trust in Christ and continue to believe in the hope of the gospel.

Also, these words of Colossians 1:23 indicate the believer's responsibility to preserve his reconciled state. All divine work is already done and executed, but it's up to the believer to remain in it. The person who has been reconciled must continue to believe in what they have believed and remain firm in it. That decision and attitude belong to the reconciled, under the powerful guidance of the Holy Spirit. Man's decision is never outside the context of God's grace.

What does it mean to remain in the faith? For the context in which Paul wrote this epistle, gnostic heresies abounded and sought to undermine the faith of new believers in the church of Christ. Because of this, Paul considered it very important that the members of the Colossian church understood clearly the reconciling work of Christ, in which they were participants. In turn, they had to be steadfast, that is, they needed to have sufficient conviction to live under that truth of the gospel without looking to other doctrines.

Paul highlighted for the Colossians three main truths on which their faith must be founded and remain:

A. Faith in Christ Jesus (Colossians 1:4)

Paul reaffirmed the divinity of Jesus by using the term 'Christ', which was so controversial during His stay in the world, because Jesus had said he was God, which the writers of the New Testament, including Paul, affirmed.

B. "Christ's physical body" (Colossians 1:22)

Paul claimed that Christ wasn't only divine; he was also human. This was because he had a body like ours, and that body was needed to redeem humanity.

C. The death of Christ brings reconciliation (Colossians 1:22)

Paul was affirming that only because of what happened on Golgotha can we have access to the presence of God. It's through Christ's death alone that we can draw near to God and be reconciled to Him.

The Christians of the first century held firmly to these truths which remain true for the Lord's church in all centuries. God continues to speak of abiding in faith and holding onto these truths must be part of our conviction and foundation. Christ continues to be the central axis of reconciliation between the people and God.

Believers in this century face many obstacles that can undermine their abiding in the faith; however, God's message remains the same. We must trust in Christ and not move away from the hope of the gospel. To achieve this, daily spiritual nourishment is essential through prayer, obedience to the Word, rejection of sin, fasting, and other spiritual disciplines.

Regarding the hope of the gospel, Paul was referring to a great secret that had been revealed to him: Christ lives in the believer, even in Gentile believers, and this gave him assurance of his participation in the coming glory.

Paul explained it in Colossians 1:27. We must remain in faith and in that hope of the gospel that is translated into the life of Christ in us and the benefits of the coming glory that is in Him. Paul saw Christ as that hope, for in another letter he wrote: "Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the command of God our Savior and of Christ Jesus our hope" (1 Timothy 1:1). Paul spoke in other texts of that hope that we have in Christ and affirmed it as eternal life (Titus 1:2, 3:7). God wants our future to be in the glory of Christ and with Him.

Questions:

- What did 'keeping the faith' mean to the Colossian believers; and how can we do this today?

Conclusion

We must remember that in other times, we were doing bad things, which made us enemies of God. But Christ, through His death on the cross, reconciled us to God, and that work restored our friendship and presented us holy before Him. Likewise, this reconciling work must be maintained through our abiding in the faith and the hope of the gospel.



Rooted and Built Up in Christ

Litzy Vidaurre (Spain)

Passage to Study: Colossians 2:6-8

Memory Verse: “See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the elemental spiritual forces of this world rather than on Christ” Colossians 2:8.

Lesson Aim: To know and understand that we must choose to remain in Christ to avoid deviating from the teachings of the Word of God.

Introduction

Children like to play with kites. These are generally flat and can come in different geometric shapes. Kites are made of very thin light materials so that they can be lifted up by the wind. Kites go anywhere the wind goes; they can go very high. In some places, they hold great kite competitions where people know how to handle them in amazing ways.

The problem with flying kites is that you have to take good care of them, because if they get hooked onto a tree, a building, or another structure, they may very well be torn to pieces because they are very delicate. When that happens, all the fun ends.

There are some people who resemble kites, because their beliefs and values are so light and superficial that they are carried away by any new trend, idea, religion, teaching, thought, etc. These people end up living on a roller coaster of emotions and decisions that create a lot of confusion and imbalance in their lives. So, we have to be careful, because the “wind” comes from all places and goes anywhere.

In today’s lesson, we’ll see that the apostle Paul advised Christians that they should be more like a tree, whose roots are so deep that not even hurricane winds can separate them from their foundation.

I. Rooted and built up in Christ (Col. 2:6-7)

In Colossians 2:6-8, we read a portion of the letter that Paul, as a pastor, sent very lovingly to Christians living in the city of Colossae. At the time that Paul wrote the letter, he was in prison. The surprising thing is that even though he was in jail, this servant of God told the Colossians that he always remembered them, loved them, and that he was proud of them because they had made the decision to follow the Lord Jesus. He also told them that he prayed for them to be persevering and faithful Christians (Colossians 1).

Paul was well aware that they were facing very difficult situations in their lives. We too sometimes have to face situations so painful that continuing doing the good that God commands may seem impossible. When this happens, our strength runs out, we start to have very intense negative feelings, and our thoughts get confused and play tricks on us. Also, wrong decisions may seem attractive and “very good options.” So, the problem with letting ourselves go with the flow of difficult situations is a very great risk because we can suffer even more by turning away from God. If we let ourselves be carried away by any wind, our lives, like a kite, can catch onto something that will destroy us forever. At times like this, remaining faithful to God’s will requires unchangeable convictions.

Life sometimes is like a hurricane. Letting ourselves be carried away by those winds can lash us against other things, even making us lose our lives. The best option is to stick to something well-grounded and not let go under any circumstances. The hurricane will go away and we will remain strong and firm.

Knowing human nature, Paul cared for the Colossians and told them to be “rooted and built in him [Christ]” (Colossians 2:6-7). This practical advice from Paul implies developing strong convictions about who God is, who Jesus is, and the power of the plan of salvation. When Christians are fully convinced of our place in Christ’s heart, all other decisions will be made according to the Christ’s purpose for our lives. If we walk close to the Lord, there is practically no room for wrong decisions.

Understanding from the heart what we have just mentioned is truly wonderful and liberating. If God is the center of our lives, if God’s love completely fills our heart and all of our emotional needs, if the almighty power of God is real in our lives, there’s no place to trust anything else, because we have everything we need in God.

The Colossian Christians could live an abundant life, full of joy, tranquility, peace, wisdom, and blessings for themselves and others because they had their roots in Christ. No hurricane wind could have defeated them. By believing in Christ, and abiding in Him, the trajectory of their lives was secure.

Today, we too can be rooted in Christ. He wants the same for us. He wants us to persevere in His presence, to live the kind of life that He wants us to enjoy, and finally, to arrive safely to His heavenly presence. We can be sure that in the final analysis, everything has been already resolved because our lives are in God's hands.

In addition, the apostle told the Colossian brothers and sisters: "[be] strengthened in the faith as you were taught..." (Colossians 2:7b). We see that faith is very important for perseverance and permanence in Christ. Although we won't be able to physically see that Christ is accompanying and working with us, He's there. Remember how Jesus exhorted Peter in the water when he was sinking, asking him why he had doubts (Matthew 14:31). We must resist the temptation to doubt our perfect Savior because He has never failed, He has never been late, and He has never forsaken us. So, the key to a full life, free from confusing ups and downs, is to remain in Christ and in His teachings.

Questions:

- Do you think we can be rooted in Christ? How can we do it?
- Could you share an example of a situation in your life where you remained faithful to God? How did you feel at the end of that situation?

II. Protected from falsehoods (Col. 2:8)

The second part of today's study passage presents us with a warning. The apostle Paul wrote to the Colossians: "See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the elemental spiritual forces of this world rather than on Christ" (v.8).

We may begin to wonder what are some examples of hollow and deceptive philosophies. The reality is that today, just as in the times of the early church in Rome and ancient Greece, there are many streams of thought. There are many teachings from different world religions, and even from other fields of study such as medicine, psychology, biology and astronomy, to name a few examples. Each of these streams of thought can offer many ideas that may seem novel, interesting, positive, wise and very correct. However, if we analyze them with caution with the help of the Word of God, we realize that they are "hollow"; that is to say, they

don't have a foundation of truth. If we trust these, we'll be very disappointed. If we make decisions based on these hollow philosophies, we'll be very hurt.

Some hollow philosophies can teach, for example, that "abortion is the best thing"; that "marriage separation will bring good things"; that "there is no way out of depression and anxiety"; that "euthanasia is recommended", etc. Hollow subtleties confuse young and old alike. Some of these are the following: "marijuana is natural", "your birth was a mistake", "life isn't worth it", "sexual relations before marriage don't harm anyone", "nobody will know", and the most terrible thing, "nobody loves me."

Wrong philosophies can cause damage, even death, just like when we are in the middle of a hurricane without protection. The best thing is to learn how to avoid them from the beginning. As soon as we recognize them as hollow philosophies, we must close down that channel of communication. However, we must realize that sometimes there are "subtleties," that is to say, deceptive teachings can come so disguised that it's difficult to recognize them, even when the person is very intelligent. We need to know that the one behind these deceptions is the father of lies (John 8:44). That's why there so much cunning used to confuse us.

Unfortunately, the enemy knows what things attract us the most, what things we long for or what we need the most, what ideas may seem most interesting to us, etc., so on that he designs the possible trap. We must be very vigilant, as we read in 1 Thessalonians 5:21: "...test them all; hold on to what is good."

Because of this, Paul told the Colossians that they should be "strengthened in the faith" as they had been taught (Colossians 2:7). Faith is what helps us remain faithful to the teachings of Christ and put aside all confusing lies. Paul's advice is very effective and infallible.

First, we must seek each day to know more of God's teachings for our lives. God has guidance for every situation that we may face in this life. There's nothing that can surprise Him; there's nothing that God doesn't understand. There's nothing that He cannot solve. If we treasure his Word and His promises in our hearts, we'll never fall into the trap of subtle lies. God provides guidance for every person, male or female, of any age, from any past experience, of any socioeconomic status, of any temperament, of any culture, who suffers from any physical or emotional illness, etc. What God wants most is to guide us to be able to live a healthy, pure, happy and holy life. He wants us to stay very close to Him and He will fill us completely so that we lack nothing.

Second, we must secure and strengthen our faith, which is affirmed by reading the Word, hearing testimonies, and overcoming the trials we face. When we pray and wait, we receive God's response, and our faith and trust in God grows. If our faith is weak, we must strengthen it. We must ask God to help us have more faith. We see in the man who cried out to Jesus as he sought healing for his son: "I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!" (Mark 9:24). God in His mercy yearns to help us grow in our faith so that we won't be shaken about like a kite by hollow philosophies.

Thirdly, we must remember the irreplaceable importance of firm and consistent faith. In the passage from Ephesians 6, Paul reminded Christians that they weren't alone when they had to face the difficulties of life because God has provided an infallible armor for the protection of His beloved children. The only requirement is that His children wear that armor when fighting the battle ahead. Specifically about faith he said: "...take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one" (Ephesians 6:16). The flaming arrows of the evil one may very well include the hollow philosophies and subtleties that our passage talks about.

We see clearly in the Ephesians passage that faith acts as our shield. Faith receives the impact of the arrows of lies and keeps them from our hearts. The aforementioned verse from Ephesians specifically says that we can "extinguish all the flaming arrows." They will be destroyed, put out, rather than deflected. When the fire has been extinguished, there will be no more danger. It's wonderful to understand that God has provided everything necessary for the emotional and spiritual well-being of His children.

A strengthened, tested and firm faith will give us an anchor we need to be "rooted and built up in him." The prophet Jeremiah said that he or she who trusts the Lord "will be like a tree planted by the water that sends out its roots by the stream. It doesn't fear when heat comes; its leaves are always green. It has no worries in a year of drought and never fails to bear fruit" (Jeremiah 17:7-8). This illustration of a life with deep roots is fascinating, because it shows us the kind

of life we can live, with stability and fruit, even resilience in times of great difficulty when conditions are not ideal or comfortable, because the roots are well established and nurtured.

Jesus said to His disciples: "Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free" (John 8:32). So, we must avoid false philosophies that can enslave us. Instead, we need to know and believe the truth, and fill our minds with it so as not to be confused or doubtful. That's why we must read, study, meditate and memorize the Word of God constantly and fervently as possible. Really, our life, and that of our family, church and community, depends on this.

God has given His church clear and firm teaching to follow. As followers of Christ, we can memorize the apostles' creed to be sure not to be confused by any philosophy or hollow subtlety. The Church of the Nazarene provides us with this agreed upon statement of faith, and which we affirm as immutable truths (retrieved from <http://nazarene.org/en/beliefs>, November 14, 2018).

Questions:

- Take a few moments to think about some examples of hollow philosophies and subtleties that exist today, and then share them.
- What are some of the consequences of believing in false philosophies?

Conclusion

In today's study, we've seen that life can present us with unimaginable situations. However, with Paul's counsel and the help of Christ, we can squarely face any circumstance that life throws at us. God's Word encourages us to remain firm, persevering, and faithful to the Lord, to be "rooted" in Christ, and to avoid getting confused and ending up in dead ends. The key is to grow our roots in God, even in quiet times, so that they will be strong and deep when we face difficulties. Jesus' teachings are infallible. We can trust them wholeheartedly. Let's thank God for His love, fidelity and his constant presence with us.



Our Identity in Christ

Samuel E. Perez (Puerto Rico)

Passage to Study: Colossians 2:9-12

Memory Verse: "...in Christ you have been brought to fullness. He is the head over every power and authority" Colossians 2:10.

Lesson Aim: To develop our Christian identity in harmony with our place in Christ.

Introduction

One of the greatest dangers that many Christians have suffered throughout history is what we will call "an identity crisis." However, what exactly do we mean by identity? What is the value or importance of identity for the Christian faith? Some of the most common questions we often ask ourselves when we find ourselves in an identity crisis are:

- Who am I really?
- What do I want to do or achieve?
- What is the meaning of life?
- Where am I going?
- Where do I belong?
- What do I believe? etc.

Certainly, in some period of our life, we're forced to face an identity crisis which could trigger serious anguish, not only psychological and emotional, but also spiritual. All this causes us, in due course, a certain amount of emotional and spiritual imbalance which, if well channeled, can help us grow more and strengthen our faith as believers.

In some moments of our life, we may need to ask ourselves: what's causing doubts about who I am and what I believe? What's keeping me from growing in my Christian life? One of the possible answers in all probability is because we're having an identity crisis.

The study passage in this lesson addresses the issue of the identity of believers in Colossae. The apostle Paul wrote to the Colossians, highlighting two great virtues that they had: their faith in Christ and their love for all God's people, "because we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love you have for all God's people" (Colossians 1:4).

However, Paul also thought it advisable to warn them in his letter about external influences that were distorting their understanding of who Christ is and who we are in Him. A timely correction regarding our true identity of Christ ensures that we develop a healthy identity as Christians.

I. Who is Christ? (Colossians 2:9)

The Word says: "For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form" (v. 9). It's evident from the passage that the Apostle Paul had particular reasons to exhort the Colossian believers. This place "was a small city of Phrygia, in the Roman province of Asia. Inhabited by autochthonous settlers, Greek settlers and Jews from the Diaspora" (Schokel, Luis Alonso. *The Bible of Our People*. Spain: Ediciones Mensajero, 2013, p. 1893).

The geographical location of that church generated many influences on the way people practiced their faith. This had caused "religious syncretism," that is, a blending of two or more religious belief systems. Instead of clearly delimiting the boundaries of the fundamental doctrine of Christianity and the customs and beliefs that cannot and will never be harmonized with Christianity, it ended up mixing everything together. This situation would have generated the insertion of elements into the healthy doctrine of Christianity that ended up invalidating the Christian faith and its true identity.

Whereas the Jew made no distinction between religious and national identity because they were both the same thing, the Greco-Roman culture didn't condition its national identity to religion, but religious syncretism was part of the culture. For this reason, the Colossians had to deal with the religious and philosophical currents around them. Some believed that Jesus had not been completely divine, and others that he had not been all human. So those confusing doctrines were swirling around in the church.

They didn't realize the damage that this could cause them, so Paul, from his prison cell, felt that he needed to warn them quickly. Although this letter included a warning, one of the purposes was to explain to them who Christ is and who we are in Him.

Let's read carefully: "For in Christ all the fullness [plethora] of the Deity lives in bodily form" (v. 9). This is a very specific and clear statement of the deity of the Lord Jesus Christ, which couldn't have been stated more clearly than this. In Him, that is, in Christ, all the divine fullness dwells bodily, not just a part, but the totality of who God is. "Paul ... [affirmed] that the fullness of God not only dwells in Christ, but dwells 'bodily'; that is, lives in one who was incarnated. With this the apostle confronts any idea that denies the humanity of Christ, especially the Gnostic ideas" (González Tejera, Awilda. Know your Bible. USA: Editorial Augsburg Fortress, 2009, p. 64).

After learning the apostle's declaration and affirmation regarding the essence of the person and character of Christ, we can ask: how relevant is the apostle's declaration and affirmation of faith in relation to our identity as believers? How does being in Christ impact our identity? The identity of believers isn't limited to a series of values, rituals or the assimilation of a culture. Rather, it's based on the fact that we become like Christ. If we're indeed Christlike, then the fullness of God dwells in our lives through the Holy Spirit.

Questions:

- In your own words, explain who Christ is.
- How were the hollow philosophies at the time of the Colossian church influencing their conception of the life of the Lord Jesus?

II. Who are we in Christ? (Colossians 2:10)

"...in Christ you have been brought to fullness. He is the head over every power and authority" (v. 10). The context of this passage is of vital importance when trying to interpret it. The writer was emphasizing his concern about the false teachers because speculative false theories, skillfully presented, could destroy the trust that the Colossians had in Christ as their complete Savior. It's important to mention that our fullness, as well as our holiness, are attainable only in Christ. We can never achieve them by our own strength or virtues.

The Greek word translated "full", "complete" is *pléroó*, which means "to fill the interior". It's very important to mention here that Paul was using a nautical term '*pléroó*' ..." (Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich. Compendium of Theological Dictionary of the New Testament. USA: Challenge Books, 2002, p. 846). We could paraphrase it

as follows: "You're ready for the journey of life in Christ, and whatever you need for the journey, you'll find it in Him." It's in this sense that we can affirm and declare that Christ is the answer.

Ask the following:

- What is your need today?
- Are you being influenced by human knowledge? If so, turn to Christ.
- Are you being sidelined today by persuasive words, or by human systems or traditions? Turn to Christ.

What could the consequences be of not being clear about our identity in Christ?

Here are some of them:

- Devaluing our body
- Not feeling worthy
- Not being able to forgive
- Feeling inferior to others

Questions:

- What are some characteristics of your identity as a believer?
- Why are we complete in Christ?

III. The marks of our identity (Col. 2:11-12)

Colossians 2:11 says: "In him you were also circumcised with a circumcision not performed by human hands. Your whole self, ruled by the flesh was put off when you were circumcised by Christ." Both Paul and his disciples vehemently resisted the Christians who still wanted new Gentile believers to be circumcised. Circumcision was a mark, a sign of Yahweh's old covenant with His people. "This is my covenant with you and your descendants after you, the covenant you are to keep: Every male among you shall be circumcised. You are to undergo circumcision, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and you" (Genesis 17:10-11). That's why in this passage of Colossians Paul emphasized that God's new covenant with His people didn't involve physical circumcision carried out by the rabbi's hand, but a spiritual circumcision in Christ, who leads us on to perfection. It's our relationship with Christ that distinguishes us as God's people.

We read in Colossians 2:12: "having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through your faith in the working of God, who raised him from the dead."

Baptism is now the new sign of believers. At our baptism, we agree to identify with Christ in His baptism. As we emerge, we accept by faith His resurrection. We have been renewed, born again, brought to spiritually new life by the power of God. At our baptism, we also accept the resurrection of Jesus as the promise that the image of God, broken in Eden, can be fully restored in us.

Finally, at our baptism we enter the communion of believers, identifying ourselves as Christians. We belong to Christ's body, the church. We become more like Christ and enter the family of God, our Father.

Questions:

- Is circumcision a requirement for salvation? Comment.
- What could be, in addition to those mentioned in the lesson, other consequences of not being clear about our identity in Christ?

Conclusion

Today, as of old in Colossae, we find a fashionable type of spirituality based on esoteric beliefs such as reincarnation, transcendental meditation, all kinds of divination practice, reading the astrological charts and all kinds of pseudo-religious market products that offer salvation according to the consumer's desire. It's for this and other reasons that we must firm up our Christian identity by affirming and emphasizing our place in the person of Jesus Christ. In Him, we have everything necessary to live, serve others, and serve God.



The Freedom that Christ Imparts

Sharon Viquez (Costa Rica)

Passage to Study: Colossians 2:13-23

Memory Verse: "Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we boast in the hope of the glory of God" Romans 5:1-2.

Lesson Aim: To understand that there is no human tradition that can free us from the dominion of sin; this only comes by the grace of Jesus Christ.

Introduction

There is nothing more transformative than when we experience grace. There are many definitions of the term "grace"; but there is one that captivates me in a special way. It says, "Although man deserves God to be against him, He is for him" (Taylor, Grider, and Taylor. *Beacon Theological Dictionary*. USA: CNP, 1995, p. 314).

But why do we deserve to have God against us? To explain it we have to take a trip into biblical history and go back to the book of Genesis. The Bible tells us there that men and women were created perfect: "God saw all that he had made, and it was very good..." (Genesis 1:31a). They were created with the power to freely choose between moral alternatives (Genesis 2:16-17). However, they both misused this power, and didn't make wise choices. They decided to turn their backs on God. Genesis 3 tells us about that sad moment where Adam and Eve decided to renounce the lordship of God over their lives, and become their own masters. In the midst of that heartbreaking scene, God manifested His grace. The Bible tells us in Genesis 3:21 that "The Lord God made garments of skin for Adam and his wife and clothed them."

The following question arises: did they deserve so much love? Were they worthy of such mercy? Yet God showed His love for them by covering their bodies with warm fur clothes. He did this out of pure loving kindness for them. This shows us that despite what we may have done wrong, His divine grace was, and still is, available today.

There's something that we must never lose sight of; it's that the arms of God are always extended towards us! He has prepared the way that allows us to run into His presence. By His grace, He gave us what we didn't deserve: the sacrifice of Christ on the cross, in our place!

I. Freedom from sin (Colossians 2:13-14)

Orton Wiley defines the term "sin" as follows: "Deviation from the end or in the manner appointed by God" (Wiley and Culbertson. *Introduction to Christian Theology*. USA: CNP, 1969, p. 182). So, sinning is "missing the mark" (Taylor, Grider, and Taylor. *Beacon Theological Dictionary*. USA: CNP, 1995, p. 502); and it is "the abuse of the freedom of the created will" (Purkiser, W. T. *Exploring our Christian faith*. USA: CNP, 1988, p. 241).

Sin left us without a purpose in life, without hope, subject to physical and moral corruption, with a bad conscience, feelings of guilt and shame, feeling degraded, and without spiritual discernment. Sin created a separation between God and us, and this brought about spiritual death (Romans 6:23). In the case of Adam and Eve, after they had sinned by disobeying God's ordinance, they were still able to experience a little of God's grace. Today, we're extremely blessed because we are saturated with it.

The study passage reminds us of this truth. Colossians 2:13-14 says that we have been freed from the dominion of sin through the sacrifice that Jesus made on the cross. What does it take to be free from sin? The answer to this question was the focus of what Paul wrote in the passage quoted. Paul told the Colossians that all that was required was that they had to believe, because salvation is an act of faith. But faith in what? "...faith in the working of God, who raised him from the dead" (Colossians 2:12).

Sin had entered human nature as a consequence of Adam and Eve's disobedience (Romans 5:12). Therefore, the apostle Paul tells us in Romans 3:10 the following: "...There is no one righteous, not even one." For this reason, God made provision for our salvation. He gave us the pathway to be free from the dominion of sin (John 3:16; Romans 5:8; 1 Corinthians 15:3-4).

So in order to be free from the dominion of sin, we must believe and confess with our mouth this spiritual truth: that Christ died for us! The Word of God says that if we have believed, we are now children of God (John 1:12; Acts 16:31). It's His grace that gives us access to the Father, through faith in Jesus Christ the Lord (Ephesians 2:8-9).

It's wonderful to know that we now have a new nature, for we are no longer slaves to the dominion of sin, but are now free to live for Christ (Romans 5:1-2), for there is no longer any condemnation.

Questions:

- How would you define sin?
- What is the faith that saves us? (Colossians 2:12)

II. Freedom from the world of darkness (Colossians 2:15)

One of the most common phrases we hear in church when a believer is seduced by sin is this: "After all, I am a human being." And so, they justify their weakness in the face of temptation and sin. That's one of the greatest lies that Satan has put into our minds to reduce God's power over our lives. Colossians 2:15 says: "And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross."

In this regard, it's valid to ask ourselves the following: who are the powers and authorities? These refer to Satan and those who work with him (Ephesians 6:12). Paul stressed that Christ is superior to any of them (Colossians 2:15). Let's see some verses that support what has just been mentioned:

- Because the Lord Jesus was the one who disarmed them, and He publicly triumphed over them on the cross (Colossians 2:15). So, Christ has triumphed, and His victory is ours too!
- We now have the freedom of grace which is above the law. The Word says that by His great love, He gave us life by grace, "not by works, so that no one can boast" (Ephesians 2:4,9).
- There's nothing we can do to make God love us more. He loves us (John 3:16), not for what we do, but because we are His children.

Questions:

- What do you say to the backslidden Christian who says "After all, I am just a human being"? Does being human give us permission to commit sin?
- What do these verses say about it? (John 3:16; Ephesians 2:4,9; Colossians 2:15?)

III. Freedom of human traditions (Col. 2:16-22)

David Seamands indicates in his book that the two main causes of most emotional problems among Christians are:

1. Not knowing how to understand, receive and live God's unconditional forgiveness and grace.
2. Not knowing how to communicate that love, forgiveness and unconditional love to other people.

Seamands says that this happens because in our cultural mindset, we're used to self-realization. In other words, "the persuasion that every relationship in life is based on personal performance, that is, on what we do" (Seamands, David A. The liberating power of grace. USA: Editorial Vida, 1990, p. 9).

Some believers are constantly trying to win God's approval, falling for the lie of self-realization. Like foolish Galatians, we find it difficult to understand the simplicity of grace, and as Paul said, we want to earn perfection and righteousness through works (Galatians 3:1-5). There are also those who have been deceived by Satan, who tells them that they won't be loved until they change by their own effort.

Ask: Why are we so prone to following human traditions? Because of the lack of a clear understanding of the true message of the Gospel of Christ. We should stop trying to impress God with our actions, trying to show Him that our merits are enough to deserve His love. Rather, we must allow the Lord to show us His faithfulness, goodness, righteousness, mercy, patience, and love that gives us what we don't deserve: His forgiveness, restoration and adoption as His children. And all this comes only through His grace!

An example of a self-realized person is found in the story of the prodigal son. Let's look at the example of the older brother in Luke 15:25-32. This passage tells us of the attitude of the older brother who couldn't conceive that his brother, who had not earned merits, received the mercy of the father. Surely, he would have thought: "How is this possible? ... I've been an obedient servant. I've worked this land and remained by my father's side, and yet he doesn't recognize what I do. This is wrong! I'm the one who deserves this big celebration because I've been good."

We see the loving father who, just as he ran towards the prodigal son, later went out to meet the older son who had chosen the path of self-realization, the one who wanted to earn love on his merits. The father shows that the reason why he loves his sons is because they are his sons, just as we are God's sons and daughters and He loves us.

Tim Keller, in his book *The Prodigal God*, conducts a study of the parable of the prodigal son, and mentions that this parable was addressed to two audiences: tax collectors and sinners, “type of the younger brother”; and the Pharisees and religious leaders, “the older brother type.” The older brother’s attitude was that of the “good son” who never left the house. However, like the youngest son, he too was very far from the father’s heart, because he couldn’t enjoy his embrace. He kept trying to win it through good deeds by trying to be religious or moralistic, as was the style of worship of the Pharisees and religious leaders (retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dCB5mzmYjQg>, January 30, 2019).

Max Lucado says the following: “I have no advice on how to obtain grace. The truth is that we don’t get grace, but surely it can reach us. Grace embraced the stench of the prodigals, conquered Paul’s hatred, and promises to do the same in us” (Lucado, Max. *Grace*. USA: Editorial Nelson, 2012, p. 10).

The heavenly Father has come to meet us, to ask us not to remain prisoners of sin or legalism, that is that human justice that clouds our minds and makes us forget that there are no human merits that can earn us what God has given us for free. It only requires an act of faith in what Jesus did on the cross to save us, to redeem us, justify us and adopt us as His children.

“Salvation by faith seems very easy to many people. They think they need to do something on their part to save themselves. Their religion becomes their self-effort that leads either to discouragement or pride, and finally to eternal death. The simple way of Christ is the only way that leads to eternal life” (The Daily Living Bible. USA: Editorial Caribe, 1997, p. 1684).

Questions:

- Are you one of those Christians who’s trying to show God that you deserve salvation?
- How does grace work in our lives?

IV. Freedom, not debauchery (Col. 2:23)

Colossians 2:23 says: “Such regulations indeed have an appearance of wisdom, with their self-imposed worship, their false humility and their harsh treatment of the body, but they lack any value in restraining sensual indulgence.” Paul, in his letters, continually emphasized that salvation is an act of grace, given by God to all those who believe in Him for eternal life, as we have been emphasizing throughout this lesson.

Paul also reminds us of some very important life principles. Here are some of them:

- We are now part of the family of God, and all we have to do is to appropriate what the Bible says in Romans 8:2-4. So, we must live in the knowledge that we are people controlled by the Holy Spirit, free from the dominion of sin, which was something that the law couldn’t do, but which Christ did it the cross. The Lord has dealt with sin so that we no longer live following our evil desires.
- We must show thanks to God for His goodness, presenting ourselves as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God (Romans 12:1-2).
- We must reject all evil (1 Thessalonians 5:21-22).
- Although each one of us is free to “do what we want”, we must be clear that not everything we want is always beneficial (1 Corinthians 6:12).

The Bible gives us the correct parameters for living in true freedom. We get this when, filled with the Holy Spirit, we make correct use of our free will. The ability to make correct choices is a gift from God, who has made us in His image and likeness (Genesis 1:26).

Meditate on this: How does God treat His children? As beings empowered to make good decisions, thanks to Him, we have received discernment that has been brought to life in us by the presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives.

Questions:

- Paul reminded us of some very important life principles. Review each one and explain the truth for us today.
 - * Romans 8:2-4
 - * Romans 12:1-2
 - * 1 Thessalonians 5:21-22
 - * 1 Corinthians 6:12 .

Conclusion

We don’t live in holiness to achieve salvation, because we receive salvation through Christ. We live a life of holiness to express our gratitude to God for His grace. We do it not out of fear of losing our entrance to heaven, but because we’re full of gratitude that “although we deserved that God was against us, He’s in our favor.”



Living as One Made Alive in Christ

Eduardo Velázquez (Argentina)

Passage to Study: Colossians 3:1-4

Memory Verse: “Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God” Colossians 3:1.

Lesson Aim: To understand that to be a Christian is to live a new life, risen with Christ, renouncing and dying to former practices and beliefs contrary to biblical teaching.

Introduction

It's amazing how the Bible shows us that our new life in Christ gives us a new perspective on human existence. We learn that being a Christian places us in the reality of a new birth, which is both spiritual and eternal, because we've been transformed by God into new creatures (2 Corinthians 5:17). This transformation brings new capacities, such as a change of attitude towards evil and sin, sensitivity to spiritual realities, understanding what the Bible is saying, yearning to worship and serve God, and a deep desire to do His will. This is what Paul calls in today's study passage as the risen life in Christ.

On the other hand, in clear contrast, we live in the reality of a world that ignores grace and divine love, and lives contrary to the commandments of God, without knowing Him personally. This makes unsanctified believers live in constant conflict between the new life and the pressures of the old nature and its manifestations. The message of the Scriptures is that God wants us to grow in a victorious life until we reach full spiritual maturity and holiness.

Faced with these opposite realities, the apostle Paul addressed the Colossians, trying to establish the differences between these two realities in such a way that they were clear about their vocation to which God had called them.

I. “Set your hearts on things above” (Col. 3:1)

Paul says that those who have been made alive in Christ should set their “hearts on things above.” This expression implies striving to put heavenly priorities before earthly things, that is, preferring the eternal over the temporary. However, since we still live in this world, setting our hearts on things above doesn't mean that we have to live in ‘the clouds’, disconnected from daily responsibilities and occupations. Rather it involves thinking soberly and aspiring to do what God wants us to do.

In view of our wonderful identification with Christ, we have a great responsibility to set our “hearts on things above” (Colossians 3:1). Through Christ's death, burial, resurrection, and ascension, we've been separated from the old life of this world and now belong to a new heavenly life.

But how do we search for “the things above”? The secret is to focus on them rather than on things on earth. As believers who have been raised with Christ, we must have our feet on earth, but our minds and longings in heaven. This doesn't mean that we should become so distracted with heaven that we're useless on earth. It means that the practical affairs of each day must be directed by Christ, who is in heaven. It also means that we must look at the earthly from the heavenly point of view.

The correct understanding of God's will requires that our minds be constantly renewed (Romans 12:2). This will produce actions that are relevant to the here and now. God's commandments shouldn't be carried out with cold attitudes, limiting ourselves to earthly things that don't transcend, leading us to cold and vain religiosity. So, seeking the things that are above doesn't require us to be otherworldly, but on the contrary, we have to remain firm in Christ, in order to give flavor to the world with the values of the kingdom of God (John 17:14-21).

A. “Since then, you have been raised with Christ...” (v. 1a)

Let's remember that the phrase with which Colossians 3 begins is a certainty, not just a possibility. Our death and resurrection are two acts that were performed in the past and symbolized in baptism. It's important to note that this passage in Colossians expresses the same teaching as Romans 6:4-5, where Paul mentioned baptism as a symbol of the believer's death and resurrection in Christ. Paul taught that this new life, a product of the resurrection of Christ, must be translated into a life that shows good in a practical way, with acts of love in the different areas of our life.

B. Through Christ who is seated at the right hand of God (v. 1c)

“Seated at the right hand of God” was a phrase that Paul used to highlight Christ’s authority and place of honor. It also describes His continued ministry of intercession for the saints (Romans 8:34; Hebrews 7:25, 9:24; 1 John 2:1). To say that Jesus is seated at the right hand of God is an expression where the Bible uses human physical terms to describe a holy, eternal and spiritual God. We understand through this that all the authority and power of Christ comes to our aid to make us victorious in the new life that we have in Him.

The faithful believer will regularly examine whether his ambitions and lifestyle are consistent with the ultimate goal to which God has called him or her (to the very heavens where He rules). So, it follows that believers have Christ not only as their Savior, but also as their Lord in all aspects of life.

Questions:

- Explain in your own words what the “things above” are.
- What are some practical ways you can search for the things above?

II. We are dead to this world (Col. 3:2-3)

Paul conveyed in this expression the assurance of a fait accompli: “For you died...” (v. 3), means that our desire for the lifestyle of this world potentially ceased to exist when we became Christians. This truth gives us a different perspective on our life here on earth. The context of the expression reveals to us what the apostle was referring to when he talked about ‘the things of the earth’ (v. 2). In the following verses (Colossians 3:5-9), he referred to the manifestations and works of the old sinful nature which, in Galatians 5:19-21, Paul defined as the works of the flesh.

A. “On earthly things...” (v. 2)

We have already referred to the meaning of the things of the earth saying that we believers have died to that old nature that enslaved us when we were without Christ, and from which we were freed when we believed in Him. Also, it should be noted that Paul referred to the wrong thoughts that dominated our lives before knowing Christ, and this he showed in the context of our study passage. So, in Colossians 2:16-23, Paul spoke to the Colossian believers about the ancient form of the religions they practiced before they knew Christ, thinking that in this way they were drawing near to God, but which certainly have no value in the new life: “Since you died with Christ to the elemental spiritual

forces of this world, why, as though you still belonged to the world, do you submit to its rules” (Colossians 2:20).

And further on in Colossians 3:5-11, the apostle referred to another aspect of “the things of the earth” when he affirmed that all the anti-values, attitudes and actions that dominated the old life must die. So, we should only worship and serve Christ, and live a life that reflects Him in all aspects.

B. “Your life is now hidden with Christ in God...” (v.3)

For us as Christians, our new life is hidden with Christ in God. With Christ, because there is a union with Him in His death and resurrection, and in God, because Christ Himself is God, and those who belong to Him have their being in God as well. Our lives are hidden in Christ and are safe, and nobody can touch them there because they’re protected. Likewise, this also implies that outside of Christ, we’ll only have judgment and condemnation.

Ask:

- In what way are we hidden?
- What does it mean then that the life of the believer is “hidden with Christ in God?”

Hidden means safe. It’s not just a future wish, but an already accomplished factor. Our service and conduct don’t earn our salvation, but they are a consequence of it. Rest assured! Our salvation is secure, and we must live each day for Christ.

Questions:

- What does it mean that we have died to this world?
- What is the evidence of this in your life?

III. We will enter into the glory of Christ (Colossians 3:4)

In our new life as believers, Christ gives us power to live in victory with His help, and power in the present earthly life, but he also gives us hope for the future: He will come again (Revelation 22:12). In the remaining verses of Colossians 3, Paul explained how Christians should live now in order to be prepared for the return of Christ.

The apostle implied that, in a way, our new life in Christ isn’t visible. But this new life will be fully evident when Christ, who is our life, appears at His Second Coming. The day when we all see Jesus at His second coming will also be the day when His sons and daughters will be revealed. This manifestation will take place in glory, because it will involve sharing the full likeness of Christ, and receiving a risen and glorious body.

This biblical perspective increases our hope and motivation to consecrate our lives more and more to Christ, worshiping and serving Him, knowing that nothing we do for Him goes unnoticed and will have repercussions in eternity.

The glorification of our lives must be the hope that governs all our walking on this earth, especially in tumultuous and difficult times. Paul himself stated: "I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us" (Romans 8:18). So, eternal life must also motivate us to live a life of purity of heart and love that blesses others in the preaching of the Good News of salvation and compassionate actions that show forth the love of God, whom we worship and serve.

Questions:

- When will it be known who the true Christians are?
- Name three reasons why the glorification of believers at Christ's second coming provides hope in this life. (Back up your answer with some Bible verses).

Conclusion

As Christians, we must live a new life with Christ, renouncing and dying to the former practices and beliefs that are contrary to the Bible. This is a challenge that must accompany us until the Lord calls us to live in His presence.



A New Dress Code

Natalio Cruz (Mexico)

Passage to Study: Colossians 3:5-15

Memory Verse: "...over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity" Colossians 3:14.

Lesson Aim: To learn to "put on" Kingdom values with the Lord's help.

Introduction

Christianity is more than just declaring that Jesus is our Lord and Savior; it's about changed lives. This is what Paul was writing about in Colossians 3:5-15. Consider the following question: How should we behave now that we are already Christians? Perhaps the first Christians asked themselves this question. In this lesson, we're going to answer this question through three indications that the apostle Paul left us in his letter to the Colossians.

I. Let's take off our old clothes (Col. 3:5-9)

Imagine that you're preparing to go to a big party. You shower and comb your hair, but put on the old dirty clothes you were wearing before. What will happen? No matter how clean you are after the shower, the problem will persist, because by putting back on your dirty clothes, you will look and smell the same as before, and all your ablutions will have been useless.

Paul knew that exchanging the old nature for the new one that Christ gives implies more than we can imagine. He tells us to "Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry" (v. 5). The metaphor used by Paul in the passage is about 'taking off' and 'putting on.' He applies it to our character, decisions and nature. In this regard, removing or putting on was an excellent way for the apostle to say that it's our decision. In other words, it's up to you and me to remove these practices from our lives.

In other words, Paul reminded us that each of the sinful works must be removed from our lives with the help of the Holy Spirit, both voluntarily and intentionally. For example, the list begins with things that lurk within us (v. 5). These actions, "sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed..." can be dealt with if we chose to. Jesus said: "But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her

in his heart" (Matthew 5:28). It's about our desires, about plans that lead us to earthly things, to those things that satisfy us momentarily and not eternally. Let's be alert!

After this, the apostle Paul listed those attitudes that have to do with our reactions, either to protect ourselves or to attack someone (Colossians 3:8-9). It's not just about what we want, and how we plan our days, but also how to react in certain situations. Paul made it clear that there are issues that have to do with our inner being, and others that have to do with external events, including our interpersonal relationships. It's here that we have the following list of sinful actions: anger, rage, malice, slander, dishonest words, and lies.

We see that all these sinful actions are related to our coexistence and interpersonal development. For example: if someone insults us, our reaction could be rage. If someone gives us a bad look, we might get angry. If a person speaks ill of us or doesn't recognize our work, we may be tempted to malign them and find a way to get revenge or make them look bad.

As for blasphemy, this is defined as: "Denigrating, insulting, vilifying, vituperating, pronouncing words of reproach against God or another person" (Taylor, Grider and Taylor. Beacon Theological Dictionary. USA: CNP, 1995, p. 98). So, blasphemy isn't just about speaking ill of God, but also against other people.

Ask: How many times do we speak badly about other people?

Perhaps it was a waiter who didn't serve us well, or a taxi-driver who didn't treat us politely, or a person who gave us a bad look, or vice versa. If our reaction is to speak ill of them, we've uttered dishonest words. These negative reactions towards someone who doesn't like us, or who has hurt us, are simply the reaction of human beings whose minds are set on what is earthly, on the here and now, and not on heavenly things. In those moments, we can notice those old clothes that smell bad in our lives.

All of these things make the smell inside us unpleasant before people, and worse still, before God.

Ask: Do you think anyone can hug someone who wears the same clothes for six months?

I think it won't be easy to approach such a person. But as children of God, we must know that He has given us new clothing.

Questions:

- What are the old clothes that you think you should remove from your life?
- Why do you think it's difficult to take off those clothes?

II. Let us put on the new clothes that God gives us (Colossians 3:10-13)

Perhaps Paul's readers wondered: what is this new dress code? The reason for asking such a question is that many of us are used to our way of life. We may not be aware of the bad words we use every day because we hear those sorts of words all around us. Or perhaps we haven't realized the inadequate way we behave because usually our society is selfish, rude and disrespectful. Meditate on this: do you know someone who isn't lying? Well, I think that question answers itself. The sad thing is that this involves us, and we may think that lying is OK. People say: "Well, there's a limit to the size or color of lies. In other words, you can lie when you're being harmed, or when it's something apparently insignificant, or if it brings you benefit."

Because of such influences, Paul defined the dress code we should adopt "as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved" (v.12a). Imagine going out in some fine clothes that are very special and luxurious, but because they haven't been cleaned for months, they are filthy. This garment will have lost all its attractiveness. Likewise, Paul tells us that we cannot wear the same dirty clothes after we have been cleaned by the Lord, just as we don't put on dirty clothes after we've had a shower.

When we've been set apart for God, we must choose a different sort of "dress code." Being risen with Christ means that we must love our parents, our children, our family members, and enjoy living in integrity. Holiness is, therefore, a way of life that protects us from all those terrible experiences as we consecrate ourselves to God.

The last quality of those who choose this new dress code is that the wearer is loved (v. 12). Have you ever wondered why a mother wakes up at night to care for her baby? The answer is for love, a love that translates into meeting needs and caring for the baby's inability to fend for itself. God does the same for each of His

children. Why does He listen to us, seek us out and rescue us? It's for love! He knows that we're not capable of surviving alone, that we are needy. This is why the apostle Paul shared these characteristics with us (v. 12). We've been chosen, sanctified, and loved by God.

The other characteristics of the new dress code are these: compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience, and support and forgiveness for one another (vs. 12-13). This has to do with how we act. Thus, the former characteristics give us an identity and these second ones, the coherence between what we are and what we do. Someone who has chosen the right 'dress code' will be safer, will be able to show mercy, kindness, etc. Someone who is holy will be able to perform these actions, and someone who has experienced the deep love of God will be able to express it in the same way.

This garment we have to put on is to reflect Jesus himself, who has mercy on humanity (Matthew 9:36), who acts with kindness (Titus 3:4), who was humble because He renounced His divine rights and privileges (Philippians 2:1-10), showed obedience despite being God (Matthew 11:29), and today shows patience in waiting for the repentance of all humanity (2 Peter 3:9), and forgives us because He died on the cross.

Questions:

- How does it feel to understand the characteristics that God gives us as bearers of 'new clothing'?
- What feature of the new 'dress code' have you never considered in your life before?

III. Let's put on the new clothing (Col. 3:14-15)

In the previous point, the description of the new dress was discussed, but how should we put it on? First, to put on these new clothes we must recognize that we have the characteristics of the wearer, because God already loved us, and rescued us by choosing and sanctifying us (Ephesians 1:3-6). Secondly, we must choose to put on the new clothing, and wear it day by day. The characteristics of the new dress code are:

- a). Mercy:** When we speak of mercy, we normally think of receiving it, and we can affirm that God is merciful (Psalm 86:15). But mercy isn't fully experienced until we give it. It helps us restore relationships, just as Jesus restored the relationship with us by His mercy. If you have a relationship where you've been offended by someone or things are going wrong, showing mercy can help. But this implies that you will help the one who hurt, disappointed and failed you, in the same way that God acted in relation to us.

b). Kindness: this quality has to do with the way you present yourself to people. Ask yourself: Am I known as a good or a bad person? A kind person is someone who helps, treats others well, and is attentive. Are we kind to people while driving our car? What impression do we leave on the life of a person we have just met?

c). Humility: this quality helps us to understand those around us, to always learn something new from other people. Someone who is humble is always ready to obey, help, and collaborate. The opposite is an arrogant person, who no one wants to be around. Have we found ourselves in situations where people don't collaborate, hindering the task on hand? If we're humble, we can unite people and complete the goal. If we choose to put on as a garment this attitude, our team, company or family will be greatly helped.

d). Meekness: together with the previous quality, meekness is always in opposition to the fierce jungle animals. For example, a lion is very strong, powerful, but in reality, all that isn't useful to us because it's not tame. In other words, all that strength and capacity is wasted, unlike tame beasts of burden, such as a horse, a donkey, a cow, etc. Each of these animals are not as impressive as the lion, but they are certainly more useful.

Similarly, when we flaunt our abilities and don't cooperate with the Kingdom in a project or on a personal level, etc., we're acting like a lion. There are people who everyone admires, but who aren't helpful, unlike others who make their gifts and talents available, and are willing to collaborate on a project. On the spiritual plane, we need to join in the divine project, our church, the ministry wherever we are. We must not be like the lion that only roars and destroys.

e). Patience: this is one more quality of the Christian that's associated with maturity. The more mature you are, the more patient you tend to be. Patience can be seen when we appreciate that children don't always understand, that adolescents are learning and defining many aspects in their lives, that addicts must be helped, and that the people who harm us often do so because they need to be healed. This virtue gives us the possibility to see the background of the situations. We're often in a big hurry and ask God for things, but He knows that we're often like teenagers asking for money, a car and freedom. Being patient implies that we're willing to wait and understand when things don't happen immediately or as we had hoped. Patience is a process.

f). Support: Paul defined this quality in the following way: "Bearing with each other" (v. 13a). This means supporting or carrying the burdens of others, tolerating others with patience.

g). Forgiveness: finally, forgiveness is associated with the bond of love. So, if we love, we forgive; if we forgive, we love. Loving encompasses all the above qualities. In the decision to love God, we love our neighbor. And when we love our neighbor, we love God.

Questions:

- How would you 'put on' meekness when dealing with people who have offended you?
- What feature of this part of the new 'dress code' has been difficult for you to put on in your Christian life?

Conclusion

If we put on the garments of holiness, love, mercy, kindness, humility, meekness, patience, mutual support and forgiveness day by day; We will be reflecting the love of God to each person who deals with us in all our daily activities that we do on this earth.

Imperatives of a Successful Christian Life

Clever H. Tobar (USA)

Passage to Study: Colossians 3:16-17

Memory Verse: “Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts” Colossians 3:16.

Lesson Aim: To understand the importance of the Bible in our spiritual growth, and to analyze the important recommendations that are given for a successful Christian life.

Introduction

We can infer from Colossians 2:1 that Paul possibly never visited the church in Colossae. While he was in Rome, Epaphras may have brought him news from this church. As Epaphras was going back to Colossae with Tychicus and Onesimus, Paul took the opportunity to send written recommendations with them to the Colossians. (Colossians 4:7-9)

Continuing a bit with the history of this church, it was possibly formed during Paul’s stay in Ephesus during his third missionary journey, and that Epaphras and Timothy were the evangelists who worked directly in its organization (Acts 19:21-22). However, the apostle never ceased to feel a high sense of responsibility for the spiritual growth of this church. Because he was concerned about them, Paul attacked the philosophical nature of false beliefs and the false teachers that were influencing the congregation (Colossians 2:8). So, the recommendation in the passage under study is especially important. Paul said that Christians need to put to death earthly worldly things and live their new life in Christ (Colossians 3:5a).

In this letter, Paul shared a set of great recommendations (Colossians 3:5-15) which point to lives transformed by the power of the gospel (Romans 1:16). The Colossian Christians needed to be committed to a life of practical holiness. The only way, Paul said, was to die to the old self and recognize that in Christ they had been renewed in knowledge after the image of their Creator (Colossians 3:10).

What do we have to do to be successful as Christians? In Colossians 3:16-17, he gave us the following recommendations that we’ll study.

I. “Let the message of Christ dwell among you...” (Colossians 3:16a)

A. Each Christian must base their beliefs on the Word of God.

Ask your students:

- What do you think is usually on people’s minds in the non-Christian world around us.

The apostle Paul taught that biblical truth must be established in our hearts and minds. At first, a new believer will start to read and discover what the Bible says. We learn even more about the Bible through listening to sermons and Bible studies, and meditating on passages of the Bible in our Quiet Times with God. As we grow little by little, we’re able to analyze the instructions and put them into practice.

Ask your students: How has the Bible helped you as a Christian.

B. The gospel must affect us “richly”

What does it mean for the message of Christ to dwell in us richly, or as other translations put in, ‘in abundance’?

Paul is referring to putting it into practice. Head knowledge isn’t enough. The Holy Spirit inspired the biblical authors to write what they did to guide our actions. We need to apply the biblical message to our lives and be obedient followers of Jesus.

Jesus said: “A good man brings good things out of the good stored up in his heart, and an evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in his heart. For the mouth speaks what the heart is full of” (Luke 6:45). It’s about “walking the talk.”

C. “The message of Christ...”

Jesus was the ultimate revelation of God the Father (John 1:1; Hebrews 1:1-2). If we want to be like Him, we need to read and meditate on how He lived His life, as recorded for us by the writers of the four gospels. Jesus said to his disciples: “Anyone who loves me will obey my teaching. My Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them. Anyone who doesn't love me won't obey my teaching. These words you hear are not my own; they belong to the Father who sent me” (John 14:23-24).

Questions:

- Define in your own words what it is to “dwell or remain”, according to what you understood.
- Share three benefits that the believer experiences when the Word of God dwells in him.

II. God's Word should serve as a guide and encouragement (Colossians 3:16a)

A. Light on our path (Psalm 119:105)

Tell your students:

I would like you to make two lists:

1. The good things that you consider that your parents have done.
2. The wrong things they did.

Now I want you to associate what you put on your lists with your parents' knowledge of the Bible.

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.” The Bible will give us light for our pathway through life, showing us where we should go or what we should do, and which ways lead to dead ends or even disaster and destruction.

The psalmist wrote it this way: “I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you” (Psalm 119:11).

C. “Teach and admonish one another in all wisdom”

The apostle Paul used the word “*admonish*”. The on-line dictionary defines admonish as “advise or urge (someone) earnestly” (<https://www.google.com/search?q=admonish+>). This doesn't mean judging or ‘telling people off’ for something they appear to have done wrong. It has to do with advising and encouraging people wisely. God as our Father wants us to have victory, success and happiness.

Just as God corrects us because He loves us and wants our best, so too we as believers must make love the force that motivates our lives. We too are called to gently encourage others to do what is right because we are called to Love God with all our hearts and our neighbor as ourselves. (Matthew 22:36-39).

Questions:

- What dangers threaten the life of a believer who isn't guided by the Word of God?
- List two aspects of your life that were motivated by the Bible. Share.

III. Worship as evidence of a heart where the Word of God dwells (Colossians 3:16b)

A. The spiritual manifestation of songs to the Lord

In our church services, we all join in the songs of praise to God. A Christian who is truly grounded in the Word of God will praise Him together with the congregation from a full and grateful heart. This shouldn't just happen on Sundays. Our way of life should be full of praise as we go about our daily tasks.

“Psalms, hymns, and songs” make sense when fed by the Word of God. Unfortunately, although the rhythm may be very attractive, often what we sing are words that are not based on the Bible. We must constantly discern if what we are singing is true to the Bible, and if our spirits are filled with joy, gratitude and love for the one who gave His life for our salvation.

B. Praise with the correct attitude

Paul said: “Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts” (3:16). Paul says that we must worship with the right attitude with gratitude in our hearts.

God deserves that we present ourselves constantly before Him with hearts full of gratitude.

Questions:

- According to your criteria, what are the evidences of true worship?
- Who are really singing in the church service?
- Why do some people not sing in the praise time?
- What should be our attitude when we present our praise to the Lord? Comment.

IV. “... Do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus” (Colossians 3:17)

A. Limits in the believer’s life

We’re all surrounded by many influences such as political ideas, films, social media, among others. Many different ideas and philosophies abound. Our friends can play a large part in influencing us. The question is, what is appropriate for a Christian and what is not? Paul gave some very good advice to the Thessalonians: “test them all; hold on to what is good” (1 Thessalonians 5:21). We need to carefully analyze what’s correct and beneficial for us as followers of the Lord.

Colossians 3:17 says: “And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus.” This verse gives a very clear yard-stick to follow. We need to ask ourselves:

- Can we do this in the name of Jesus?
- What would Jesus do?
- Would what we’re going to do glorify God?

If so, then it’s good. In Philippians 4:8, Paul gives us more advice: “whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things.”

B. “Whatever you do, whether in word or deed” (Colossians 3:17a)

Popular wisdom holds that “words hurt more than deeds.” In Colossians 3:17, Paul taught that both words and deeds have equal responsibility. Just as they can do harm, they can also bring much blessing. As new creatures, believers are transformed in such a way that their hearts identify with and commit themselves

to Christ in everything. We have to follow in the footsteps of our Master, whose life on Earth showed total matching between words and actions. We can do this with His help (John 15:4-5). Ask your students to give some examples when words and deeds working together are powerful examples of the damage done by hypocrisy.

C. “...Giving thanks to God the Father through him” (Colossians 3:17b)

The writer used the verb “give” in the present tense: “giving”; In other words, being grateful is much more an act of recognition for a favor received. It’s a lifestyle that motivates and teaches. In Ephesians 1:16, the apostle Paul testified that he didn’t stop thanking God for the congregation in Ephesus. Being thankful to God should be unceasing, permanent, and constantly motivated. We need to recognize that everything that God has done in our lives through His Son is infinite, powerful, complete and perfect. It’s part of our past, present and future. God has foreseen everything in Christ for each one of His children. Nothing escapes His perfect will, and nothing is hidden from His total knowledge. Walking closely with Him provides a solution for everything.

Questions:

- Explain Colossians 3:17 in your own words.

Conclusion

Paul encouraged the Colossians to be deeply grounded in the gospel, to put the Lord’s commandments into practice, encouraging one another, joining joyfully with fellow believers in acts of praise to the Lord and doing everything, day by day, for the glory of the Lord.



Family Relationships

Máximo García (Peru)

Passage to Study: Colossians 3:18-4:1

Memory Verse: “Husbands, in the same way be considerate as you live with your wives, and treat them with respect as the weaker partner and as heirs with you of the gracious gift of life, so that nothing will hinder your prayers” I Peter 3:7.

Lesson Aim: To learn how God expects us to treat each member of the family.

Introduction

The family is a divine creation. It's not just a good idea to divide people up into families. Jesus said: “Haven't you read...that at the beginning the Creator 'made them male and female,'...For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh? So, they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore, what God has joined together, let no one separate” (Matthew 19:4-6). Marriage, by biblical definition, has a divine origin. Anthropologists, sociologists, and historians describe the various marriage practices and structures of world cultures, but undergirding all is the fact that the family was designed by God.

The family is a bulwark of social and moral human relationships. In the Old Testament, it was in the family where instruction about God was to take place. “These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up” (Deuteronomy 6:6-7). This is still true today.

In Colossae, families were composed of husbands and wives, children and household slaves. We'll look at what advice Paul gave to each of these groups.

I. The marriage relationship (Col. 3:18-19)

A. “Wives, submit yourselves to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord” (v. 18)

It's not very popular to instruct anyone to submit. We feel that submission implies domination on the part of the husband. Does it mean that women are to blindly follow without a say or opinion? One thing is very clear in Scripture, women are not inferior to men, because God created both in His image (Genesis 1:23-24).

Ephesians 5:22-33 complements the passage in Colossians. There we can see that marriage is a relationship that mirrors the love between Christ and His Church. This passage “makes it clear that a man does have responsibility for leadership in his home. But again, it's only as a leader

that his wife submits to him — not as a tyrant or her superior” (<https://www.focusonthefamily.com/>). It's about the roles that each one plays in the harmonious marriage. The husband needs to love his wife as Christ loved the church. This is the ideal situation. In fact, this process works because both parties are to “submit to one another out of reverence for Christ” (Ephesians 5:21).

B. “Husbands, love your wives and don't be harsh with them” (v. 19)

Parallel passages throw more light on this relationship. “Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her” (Ephesians 5:25); and “Husbands, in the same way be considerate as you live with your wives, and treat them with respect as the weaker partner and as heirs with you of the gracious gift of life, so that nothing will hinder your prayers” (I Peter 3:7).

These three verses complement each other. Both Colossians 3:19 and Ephesians 5:25 say that the husbands need to love their wives. They need to treat them well, not being harsh with them. The verse in Ephesians shows what kind of love they need to have for their wives, the same love that took Jesus to the cross to die for us. So, we can see that this isn't a picture of a 'macho' husband who wants to rule it over his wife. The verse in Peter's letter talks about living together as partners and heirs of God's promises. Couples need to spend more time together to really get to know each other, share each other's struggles and dreams and simply enjoy being family.

Our menfolk in our societies have to work long hours. Sometimes both wife and husband have to do this to meet the financial needs of the household.

Questions:

- What practical teaching do you find in Col. 3:18-19?
- How can couples make more time to be together?
- What do we do when a spouse is overbearing?
- Discuss with your class issues such as domestic violence, sexual abuse, among other serious family problems.

II. The parent-child relationship (Col. 3:20-21)

The parent-child relationship is essential for family harmony.

A. Children, obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord (v. 20).

This is an imperative command for children. In Ephesians 6:2-3, we also see a principle of obedience to parents based on a biblical promise given in the 5th Commandment, "Honor your father and mother" (this is the first commandment with a promise), "that it may go well with you and that you may live long in the land" (see Exodus 20:12).

We all have observed disobedient children who have harmed their own lives and brought sorrow to their parents. Proverbs 10:1 counsels: "A wise son makes a glad father; but a foolish son is a sorrow to his mother." Proverbs 13:1 also counsels: "A wise son hears his father's instruction, but a scoffer doesn't listen to rebuke."

Ask your students to share experiences. How can we help our adolescent sons and daughters not to rebel and go off track in those years when they're discovering their independence?

B. "Fathers, don't embitter your children, or they will become discouraged" (v. 20)

Psalms 127:3 tells us that: "children are a heritage from the Lord, the fruit of the womb a reward." Children are not our property; they have been lent to us to guide and prepare for life. So, parents need to learn the right way to handle their children.

The parallel passage in Ephesians 6:4 says: "Fathers, don't provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord." The verse in our study passage talks about parents who make their children embittered. Ephesians 6:4 is talking about provoking children to anger.

Ask your class: What might parents do to cause this?

The verse in Ephesians also shows the positive side of teaching our children to be disciplined and instructing them about the Lord.

We need to always ask for God's direction to raise our children well. Remember, parents, we're not always perfect, but as we draw closer to God, we can improve every day.

Questions:

- What does God long for the parent-child relationship to be like?
- What are God's ordinances for parents; and what are the divine ordinances for children.

III. The master-slave relationship (Colossians 3:22-25, 4:1)

Here we need to take a look at the context of the first century. Both the Roman and Greek cultures owned many slaves. Many worked in the fields, in mines, making roads, among other tasks. But every household owned slaves. These would have cooked, cleaned the house, taught the children their lessons among other household tasks. These

slaves could have been inherited from father to son, or they could be bought at the slave market. Many times, they had a good relationship with their masters, but this wasn't always the case. Many suffered terribly.

When Paul carried out his missionary journeys, he would have encountered many slaves working in the houses he visited. In fact, many Christian families had slaves who were now their brothers and sisters in Christ.

These verses in Colossians provide some important clues about Christian slaves and their masters. In verses 22-23, Paul encouraged them to do their work whether they were being watched or not "as working for the Lord, not for human masters." So, the Christian slave had another Master. Paul tells them that: "It is the Lord Christ you are serving" (v. 25). Abolition to slavery would come many centuries later. In the context of this epistle, it was very hard for a slave to get his freedom during the years of the Roman Empire.

One interesting person was part of the company bringing Paul's letter to Colossae – Tychicus was coming with Onesimus (Colossians 4:7-9). Onesimus was a runaway slave that had met Paul in Rome and had been converted. In the letter to Philemon, we read how Paul was sending Onesimus back to Philemon, his owner, not just as a slave but as a brother in Christ

Colossians 4:1, is a very interesting verse. It says: "Masters, provide your slaves with what is right and fair, because you know that you also have a Master in heaven." Both slave owner and slave belonged to the same Master in Heaven.

Ask your students: Do all the people we work for provide us with "what is right and fair"?

Did you know that there are an estimated 40 million people in modern slavery all over the world today?" (<https://www.globalslaveryindex.org/>). The Nazarene Church dedicates a Sunday each year to this topic. For more information, see <https://www.ncm.org/freedom-sunday>.

Questions:

- How does God long for the master-servant relationship to be?
- As Christian workers, how can we bear good witness in our workplaces?
- What can we do to support groups that fight against modern slavery and trafficking of persons?

Conclusion

Undoubtedly, the Word of God is the manual of life. In it, we can find the norms or rules to help us relate lovingly and wisely with the members of our family. We are encouraged to perform our jobs with excellence, bearing living witness that we no longer live to ourselves, but that Christ lives in us.



The Importance of Prayer

Daniel Ncuna Esono (Equatorial Guinea)

Passage to Study: Colossians 4:2-3

Memory Verse: “Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful” Colossians 4:2.

Lesson Aim: To discover the incalculable value of prayer and its usefulness in any circumstance of life.

Introduction

A true believer must be aware of the need to pray constantly. Prayer isn't only valid in moments of victory, we can also pray regardless of immediate adverse circumstances. One of the problems we have is that unfortunately some believers pray very little or almost never, even though they know the importance of prayer in the Christian life. Therefore, we need to see that prayer isn't just something we ought to do to be healthy Christians. It's one of the spiritual disciplines most used at all times and in all places by the people of God.

When we take a look at the fledgling first century church, the book of Acts recounts vivid examples of the power of united and persevering prayer. These new Christians had to face threats, persecution, and imprisonment. A specific case that illustrates this is the time that Peter and John, through Jesus, healed the lame man at the temple gate. (Acts 3:1-10). This event unleashed deep anger in the religious authorities who preferred to threaten the first community of faith.

The interesting thing about this event was the forceful response of the believers who prayed together in one mind. Acts 4:24-32 says that when Peter and John told the brothers and sisters everything that the religious leaders had told them, they unanimously raised their voices in prayer to God saying: “Sovereign Lord, you made the heavens and the earth and the sea, and everything in them ... After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly.” (vs. 24,31). Instead of running away or seeking help from other sources, the first community of faith decided to make use of the invaluable resource, prayer. In the end, the results were visible.

With these statements in our minds as true testimonies, let's study the passage from Colossians 4:2-3, which will teach us what prayer should be like, why we should pray and what we should pray for.

I. “Devote yourselves to prayer” (Col. 4:2a)

The apostle Paul is one of the biblical writers who intentionally and persistently commanded God's people to live prayerfully. As stated in the introduction, many of us pray very little. Perhaps this is because we don't know the value of prayer, or perhaps we may not know how to pray.

One of our Lord's disciples approached Jesus asking him to teach them how to pray (Luke 11:1). In doing this, they showed their interest in the subject of prayer. They not only wanted to know theoretically about it, but rather, they wanted to practice the discipline of prayer correctly.

I think we should continue to develop this point by first defining what prayer is. Prayer has been defined in many different ways. We'll limit ourselves to a few of them. Prayer is defined in the following ways: “Raise your heart to God and ask him for mercies” (Astete's catechism); “the breath of the soul” (Augustine of Hippo); “The living breath of the church of Christ” (E. P. Clowney). Prayer is “all loving communication between the soul and God” (Lacueva, Francisco. *Illustrated Theological Dictionary*. Spain: Editorial Clie, 2001, pp. 451-452). We can affirm that in the Bible we find a wide variety of prayers, especially in the psalms. Prayer can be vocalized or expressed silently as a type of communion with God. Another form of prayer is praise.

We also need to know that many times we lack beneficial things just because we don't ask for them, in other words, because we don't pray. James 4:2 says: “You desire but don't have, so you kill. You covet but you cannot get what you want, so you quarrel and fight. You don't have because you don't ask God.” Matthew 7:7 states: “Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you.” Perhaps to many, this sounds a bit far-fetched, but I believe that prayer is vital for the believer.

Based on the text we've read, prayer cannot be fickle in our lives. The apostle Paul recommended to the Colossians that they devote themselves to prayer (Colossians 4:2). The Online dictionary defines "devote" as: "to give all or a large part of one's time or resources to" (<https://www.google.com/search?q=define+devote>).

Many of us believers these days want things to happen immediately after each prayer. I don't mean by this that God cannot immediately respond to our requests. What I really want to argue is that in light of these terms, 'devote' implies perseverance, a lifetime habit of praying.

Paul uses the imperative mode of the verb, 'devote' as a command. It's intended to show the need that believer have to remain in an attitude of continuous communion with God, whether we have received or not what we have asked God for.

On one occasion when speaking of prayer and the importance of persevering in it, Jesus told his disciples the parable of the widow and the unjust judge (Luke 18:1-8). In this story, Jesus was teaching the persevering attitude in prayer. In other words, this parable of the widow, who spoke to the judge continuously, teaches us about the need to pray always.

This teaching continues to be relevant for us today. We cannot pray sporadically and expect great results. We should pray perseveringly in constant communion with God. In this way, we can be sure that we'll obtain the Lord's wise response. The instruction on prayer that the apostle Paul gave to the Colossian church wasn't limited to just saying that it should be persevering or constant; but it also provided another important characteristic, which is to be watchful in the prayer (Colossians 4:2b).

This brings to mind the incident when Jesus was with His disciples in the garden of Gethsemane (Matthew 26:36-45). In this passage, we read that Jesus prayed: "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me.' ...Then he returned to his disciples and found them sleeping. 'Couldn't you men keep watch with me for one hour?' he asked Peter. 'Watch and pray so that you won't fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.'" (vs. 38, 41). This event shows that the disciples weren't able to watch in prayer all night, because their eyes were heavy with sleep (v. 43). In this regard, John Nielson says: "We don't have to watch ourselves, which would be depressing; we are not to watch Satan, which would be crazy; we are not to watch over our sins, which would be disheartening; we must keep our gaze fixed on Christ, looking towards Jesus" (Nielson, B. John et al. Beacon Biblical Commentary, volume 9. USA: CNP, 1965, pp. 441-442).

The economic situation of our country, Equatorial Guinea, has been very delicate in recent years. Church members, like other citizens, have lost their jobs. In the first days of this crisis, the prayer meeting had an incredible attendance. The crisis is now four years old, and attendance at the prayer meeting has dropped quite a bit in the past year. It may be because the problem of unemployment is taking longer than we expected to be sorted out. We have gotten used to this situation, and maybe no longer believe the Lord can help. We're called to persevere in prayer, watch in prayer so as not to fall into temptation. We must always continue in communion and communication with God.

Questions:

- How would you rate (from 0 to 10) the perseverance of your personal prayer in these last two months? Why?
- What needs to change? How do you think you can do it?

II. Pray with thankfulness (Colossians 4:2c)

I remember observing an older lady from my town. As is the custom of the town, a typical meal was prepared (the bambucha) that was generally eaten with family and neighbors. This food was prepared in a large pot and everyone ate from the same pot. The funny thing about this lady was that she complained that there were no more hoofs left before starting to eat. She ate and was satisfied. But when she left, she never said 'thank you' for the food she had eaten. I think that an attitude similar to this was what the apostle Paul wanted to eradicate; for he frequently mentioned the expression "with thanksgiving" (v. 2b).

In the verse at this point, we see that the prayers or requests that we address to the Lord must be accompanied by thanksgiving. Our love for Christ, in recognition of what He has done for us, prompts us not only to ask Him in prayer, but also to be grateful. In prayer, thanksgiving also demonstrates our absolute dependence on God. Perhaps this is easier to understand when one appreciates having received something from someone. But it's not the same when we haven't yet received the answer to our prayer requests. Thanking God, even when the prayers haven't been answered speaks more of the faith we have in Him.

Philippians 4:6 says: "Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God." I Thessalonians 5:18 says: "Give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus." Guy King expresses it well when he explains the reason for our thankful attitude in prayer: "His love wants the best for us; his wisdom knows what is best for us; and his power achieves the best for us" (MacDonald, William. Biblical Commentary. Spain: Editorial Clie, 2004, p. 917).

We understand that we need to bring things to the Lord in prayer, but we don't always know how to thank Him when we've received what we asked for, or even when we haven't yet received something from the Lord. A teacher of mine in seminary always said that the church needs a correct theology about gratitude.

The case of the ten lepers is an example of how sometimes we don't know how to recognize what the Lord has done for us (Luke 17:11-19). In this Biblical episode, when the lepers approached our Lord Jesus Christ to ask him to heal them, they had faith in Him. The curious thing is that when they were healed, only one returned later to thank the Lord: "One of them, when he saw he was healed, came back, praising God in a loud voice. He threw himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him—and he was a Samaritan. Jesus asked, "Were not all ten cleansed? Where are the other nine?"

What is striking is that the one who returned was a Samaritan, that is to say, he belonged to the group despised by the Jews. So, this Samaritan was the only one of the ten healed lepers who not only asked the Lord for healing, but also knew how to thank Him. In other words, he returned to worship "He threw himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him—and he was a Samaritan" (Luke 17:16). This implies a position of worship.

It's interesting to note that the Lord Jesus wasn't able to ignore this attitude of gratitude this man showed. So, he asked if there weren't ten that had been cleaned, but only one, a foreigner was able to return to give thanks. Ask: where were the other nine? None of them returned to give glory to God. The illustration in this story shows us that many times as believers we are also fighting the sin of ingratitude. It's for this reason that we need to adopt the instructive words of the apostle Paul regarding prayer, to always give thanks to God in our prayers.

Questions:

- Why should we thank God, whether we have received the affirmative response to our request or not? What benefits does this bring to our life?
- Name two prayer situations in which you have publicly thanked God for having received or not received the response to your request.

III. Adopt the purpose and vision of Heaven (Colossians 4:3)

The apostle Paul said that prayer must have the purpose and vision of heaven. He asked them to: "pray for us, too, that God may open a door for our message, so that we may proclaim the mystery of Christ, for which I am in chains" (Colossians 4:3). Paul asked the

Colossians to pray for him. Also, he extended the same prayer request to other leaders who were involved in the work, so that the Lord could open the doors for the proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

The apostle Paul understood that it is God who must open the doors for us to fulfill our mission as a church. The phrase "mystery of Christ" here has been interpreted in various ways, although I prefer to keep the idea that it's the gospel to the gentiles, because really, this was the central axis of the mission of the apostle Paul.

In this passage, we can note that the apostle was aware of the difficulties that preaching the gospel was bringing, difficulties that were created by his enemies. The spread of the gospel is under divine direction (Acts 16:7). We can see something beautiful, and at the same time curious, in this verse of Colossians 4:3 - the apostle was in prison.

However, his greatest concern wasn't his own release, but rather, his greatest wish was that the Word of God shouldn't be imprisoned or blocked. It may be that Paul's wish was also that he himself be freed from prison, but he always submitted to the will of God.

At this point, what I want to show the church, in light of this verse, is that our prayers should always be aligned with the will of the heavenly Father. Because when heaven agrees, no one can block or prevent this wish from being fulfilled. When we know that what we are doing is in the will of God, we can walk with certainty because we know who is supporting us.

When it's God's will for us to carry out a project, we can stand on the promise of Deuteronomy 31:6 which says: "Be strong and courageous. Don't be afraid or terrified because of them, for the Lord your God goes with you; he'll never leave you nor forsake you." We can count on His support as we walk under His wise guidance.

Questions:

- When was the last time you consciously prayed for the spread of the gospel in the world?
- Do you think you can do it more often? Comment.

Conclusion

Today, Christians must recover the discipline of prayer. This is a valid resource in all circumstances of life. We must devote time and energy to prayer, always with thanksgiving, praying for the fulfillment of God's divine purposes. When we put this advice into practice, our prayers to God will be meaningful in our daily realities.

Passage to Study: Colossians 4:5-6

Memory Verse: “Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone” Colossians 4:6.

Lesson Aim: To learn to live as a good Christians in a world that seeks to separate us from the truth.

Introduction

The letter to the Colossians was written by the Apostle Paul to correct some deviations that were occurring in the Colossian church. This church had received the gospel of Jesus Christ, but was still influenced by paganism and incipient Gnosticism. This was the Colossian context. Responding to the Colossians, the apostle Paul addressed three major themes or issues:

1. He reminded them of God’s saving work through Jesus Christ, stressing that Christ is greater than all things, even over creation: “He is before all things, and in him all things hold together” (Colossians 1:17).
2. Likewise, the apostle reminded them that God has delivered the gospel of salvation to all people, even non-Jews: “The mystery that has been kept hidden for ages and generations, but is now disclosed to the Lord’s people. To them God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory” (Colossians 1:26-27).
3. Third, Paul addressed in this letter the practical application of this gospel that they had received by the grace of God: “Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders; make the most of every opportunity. Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone” (Colossians 4:5-6).

It’s in this third portion that we will focus our attention on in this lesson, in order to discover in depth what are the practical principles to truly live the gospel of Christ.

I. “Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders” (Colossians 4:5a)

A. ‘Be wise’

The apostle Paul assumed that the basis of the Christian life is wisdom. So, he taught that we cannot claim to live the true gospel without wisdom. This wisdom doesn’t come from the things of the world or its philosophies, but comes from God. Colossians 1:9 states: “For this reason, since the day we heard about you, we haven’t stopped praying for you. We continually ask God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all the wisdom and understanding that the Spirit gives.”

God provides the real wisdom to help us live as His children. Paul compared intellectual knowledge to practical wisdom. This means that God not only enables us to understand the gospel, but also to walk in it: “So that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God” (Colossians 1:10).

B. ‘Towards outsiders’

When we read the Scriptures, we find that one of God’s greatest concerns is that we should be clear about how we should conduct ourselves as Christians in the middle of the world in which we live. In His prayer, Jesus taught us that we are in this world; but we are not of this world (John 17:16), and that the church is the salt and light of the world in which we live (Matthew 5:13-16).

Here there’s a marked difference between those who have received the gospel and those who have not. This difference makes us responsible for those who haven’t received the gospel. Paul wanted the believers in Colossae to proclaim the gospel to all who had not heard, giving them the opportunity to receive the Lord. Previously in the letter he had counselled them not to be influenced by worldly things but rather “Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things” (Col. 3:2).

Questions:

- Where does true wisdom come from?
- With whom should we be wise? Comment.

II. “Make the most of every opportunity” (Colossians 4:5b)

A. Take advantage

Paul encouraged them to take advantage of every opportunity to communicate the message of God. This implies the urgent need of people around us to hear about the Lord. It also implies that we shouldn't be idle or waste time doing things of secondary importance. Here the apostle advised them to invest their lives wisely. It means that the time spent living as a true Christian must be invested in everything that glorifies God, who paid the price for our salvation. Colossians 3:23 says: “Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for human masters...” Taking advantage or redeeming our time means spending time on those things that really are priorities for us as Christians. We have to do what is necessary for our lives to be a clear witness to the work of Jesus Christ.

Christians should always do everything to glorify God. This involves eliminating everything that might deviate us from the path of truth. Also, we need to avoid everything that makes us waste time, and above all, eliminating what might mean that our testimony is marred. Colossians 2:8 says: “See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the elemental spiritual forces of this world rather than on Christ.”

B. ‘Every opportunity’

If we lose opportunities, we waste time. Time is a gift that God gives to each one of us. Let's think a bit about this concept of time. We can refer to ‘the times’ that we live in, our national context and the global context with its many influences on our lives. Understanding and making good use of our opportunities is very important for us as Christians. Understanding the times and culture we live in will allow us to know how we should act.

The Bible talks about “the present age” and “the age to come.” We believe that Jesus inaugurated His Kingdom when He came, yet there will be a point in time when He returns that His kingdom will be completely fulfilled. Theologians talk about it as “now” and “not yet.” We're living between two times which are linked to each other; but also are separate.

In the New Testament, there are two Greek words for time: *Kairos* and *Chronos*:

1. *Kairos* means the appointed time in the purpose of God, the time when God acts in His plan for humanity. This time is already traced by God from before the foundation of the world, and in this plan, we cannot intervene, but we must only submit to live in it.
2. *Chronos* measures time in minutes, hours and years. It's the time in which we live in this world. Unlike the previous one, this one is under our administration. It's this sort of time that the apostle Paul taught the Colossians to administer wisely (Colossians 4:5).

Paul taught that time should be used in the things of Christ and not in philosophies and hollow subtleties based on the traditions of men, according to the rudiments of the world. In other words, we cannot live the true gospel if we maintain worldly attitudes.

Questions:

- How can we waste precious time?
- How can we make good use of time?

III. “Let your conversation be always full of grace” (Colossians 4:6)

A. Words of grace, seasoned with salt

What we say to people can have many effects. We can hurt them, diminish them, shout at them, slander them or we can speak words that bless them. Instead of criticizing, we can build people up. James didn't mince his words when he wrote about the damage that the tongue can do: “Likewise, the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts. Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark. The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole body, sets the whole course of one's life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell” (James 2:5-6).

Our words need to be charged with the love of the Lord. We're encouraged to love the Lord with all our hearts and our neighbor as ourselves in the Golden Rule. 1 John 4:7-8 tells us: “Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever doesn't love doesn't know God, because God is love.”

We need to show compassion and empathy. We need to learn when to ‘hold our tongue’ and when to speak the truth in love.

Colossians 3:8-10 says: "But now you must also rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips. Don't 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." To speak words of grace, we must leave the life of the world and put on the new person, transformed by the power of Jesus Christ, made in the image of God.

When we're speaking to people who don't know the Lord, we need to pray for wisdom from the Lord to be able to say the right thing at the right time. In Colossians 4:3-4, Paul asks for prayer to be a wise witness: "And pray for us, too, that God may open a door for our message, so that we may proclaim the mystery of Christ, for which I am in chains. Pray that I may proclaim it clearly, as I should." It's the Lord who can give us the right words of the gospel with those who don't believe in him. He can make us effective witnesses and preachers, teaching us how to speak to those who don't know Christ, in order to be effective and not a stumbling blocks.

B. So that you may know how to answer

Colossians 3:13-14 says: "Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity." As Christians, we're constantly being tempted by the world. This is an ongoing fight, and victory is a fundamental way to show that we have truly been born again, manifested by our changed lives. How we respond to the temptations of this world will affect our witness.

One of the things the apostle Paul was helping the Colossians to avoid was syncretism, a tendency to mix the spiritual with that of the world, even mixing culture with Christian principles and values.

As true Christians, we must have a firm, clear, and intelligent response to avoid being a stumbling block to the unsaved. We must adhere to the true principles of the kingdom of God. As Jesus said: "All you need to say is simply 'Yes' or 'No'; anything beyond this comes from the evil one" (Matthew 5:37). This teaches us that we must be firm in our Christian convictions, ready to give a firm answer, but with grace to those who aren't Christians. Our responses to the world must be grounded in the Word of God, and not in our opinion or according to this world's philosophies.

For Paul, it was extremely important to make clear that we are saved by the sacrificial work that the Lord Jesus Christ did on the cross, and therefore, He must always have priority in our lives. We need to live as true children of God.

Questions:

- What negative effects can our words have on others?
- What sort of words can bless others in our family and in the church?
- How should we respond to outsiders?

Conclusion

The apostle Paul taught the importance of walking wisely with unbelievers, making good use of the time, and having cordial and pleasant conversations with those who haven't yet accepted the gospel as well as with our brothers and sisters in Jesus.

Christian Education book for youth and adults

We go forward confident in God's faithfulness, prepared to study the Word and continue to grow in the image of Christ. In each of these lessons, we will find invaluable biblical principles that when taught will help the church grow in grace and in the knowledge of God. Without a doubt, the topics covered in the lessons of each of these quarters will be a great blessing.

In this issue of The Path of Truth 11, we present four quarters (each with 13 lessons):

Knowing the Psalms
Characteristics of God's people
Victorious Spiritual Life: Philippians
The work of Christ in the Believer: Colossians

We encourage you to apply God's wonderful Word to your life. As you prepare for each study, allow the Holy Ghost to guide you first in your understanding of what it means to live a full life, and then share it with your disciples.

