

Kingdom of God Session 7

Living in the Light of the Kingdom Part II

In our last session, we looked at living in the light of the kingdom of God largely in terms of how we should live our lives as Christians in this life in the light of what Christ requires from us as Christians. Of course that's important, but we also need to remember that our God is most concerned about our eternal destiny. Let's be clear here, if we have turned to Christ in true faith and acknowledged him as Our lord and Master (Romans 10: 9-10) then we'll be forgiven our sins, judged as righteous in the final judgement, and admitted to God's kingdom as part of his family. We'll be accepted as children of God.

That's great, that's wonderful, but it does place an obligation on us to live lives worthy of our place in God's kingdom – which is essentially what we were considering in the last session – but we do always need to be mindful that we can only live such lives with the aid of the power of the Holy Spirit.. We also need to be very mindful of the fact that one day we'll stand before the judgement seat of Christ – both Christians and non-believers – and give an account of what we have done in this life. Christians, those who have a true saving faith in Christ, will be judged righteous and guaranteed entry into God's kingdom, but will still have to give account of themselves. Paul was well aware of this:

“10 You, then, why do you judge your brother? Or why do you look down on your brother? For we will all stand before God's judgment seat. 11 It is written: "‘As surely as I live,’ says the Lord, ‘Every knee will bow before me; every tongue will confess to God.’” 12 So then, each of us will give an account of himself to God.” (Romans 14:10-12 NIV)

At that time we'll be obliged to acknowledge Christ as Lord, we'll be compelled to do so whether we want to or not. How much better to acknowledge him willingly during this life so that our recognition will bring us entry into God's kingdom. You've seen that at that time we'll also be obliged to give an account of ourselves to God even if we have turned to Christ and become part of God's kingdom. So let's be careful how we live our lives. That's an issue to which I'm going to return in a little while.

Paul was well aware that he would have to stand before the judgement seat of Christ and it was a major factor in his ministry:

“10 For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due to him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad. 11 Since, then, we know what it is to fear the Lord, we try to persuade men. What we are is plain to God, and I hope it is also plain to your conscience. 12 ¶ We are not trying to commend ourselves to you again, but are giving you an opportunity to take pride in us, so that you can answer those who take pride in what is seen rather than in what is in the heart. 13 If we are out of our mind, it is for the sake of God; if we are in our right mind, it is for you. 14 For Christ's love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. 15 And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again. 16 ¶ So from now on we regard no-one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer. 17 Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come! 18 All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: 19 that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. 20 We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God. 21 God made him who had no sin to

be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” (2 Corinthians 5:10-21 NIV)

Paul exercises his apostolic ministry knowing that all he does is completely open to our omniscient God. For Paul every day in the life of his ministry is judgement day.

Paul is not only motivated by the idea that he'll after stand before Christ's judgement seat, but also by the great love that Christ has shown him. Paul is saying that he is so controlled by Christ's love that there is no other course of action open to him but to pursue his ministry. Since Paul's dramatic conversion on the Damascus Road, love has taken the place of hate at the very core of his being.

Paul was fully aware that he was the object of Christ's love because he knew that Christ had died for him and indeed for us all. He was convinced (verse 14) in that dramatic conversion on the Damascus Road. There is no power so great, no motivation as strong, as the knowledge that someone loves us. Paul's understanding that Jesus, in his death, loved him, was now the controlling force in the apostle's life. The association between Christ's love and Christ's death became central in Paul's exposition of the gospel. He wrote that 'the Son of God ... loved me and gave himself [suffered death on the cross] for me' (Galatians 2:20), and that 'God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.' (Romans 5:8). Paul is able to speak of the love of Christ displayed in his death either in the staggering universal terms 'one died for all' (verse 14) or in the deeply personal 'the Son of God ... loved me and gave himself for me' (Galatians 2:20). Christ's love is seen either in the immensity of the numbers loved or in the intensity of his love for each individual. The all for whom he died is the sum total of individuals, like Paul, whom he loved. We too should be motivated to live our lives in a way that honours Christ by this great love that Christ displayed on the cross.

But, what does Paul mean when he says 'and therefore all died' at the end of 2 Corinthians 5 verse 14. I believe he's saying that because of Christ's sacrifice for us, because of Christ's death for our salvation, we must die to self centred living and take up our cross and follow Christ. We who receive reconciliation with God through the death of Christ now say 'No' to self and 'Yes' to Christ. We must obey our Lord. There is no room for cheap grace here. But, we must remember that we can only do this through the power of the Holy Spirit who comes to indwell us when we first turn to Christ in faith and continues to make us really holy and righteous – to sanctify us – throughout the rest of our lives. I'll return to the issue of sanctification in a minute.

Further, Paul is not teaching universalism here. Yes, Christ died for all, but not all will enjoy the benefits of his sacrifice. We must each individually turn to Christ, believing in his death and resurrection and acknowledging him as our Lord and master (Romans 10:9-10), if we are to benefit from his salvific death on the cross.

Here Paul twice uses the words no longer. He means that we who have turned to Christ no longer live for ourselves. Such behaviour belongs to the old self which has gone and is instead replaced by the new self, the new creation, which has now come (verse 17) .

Prior to his Damascus Road experience Paul had lived an egocentric life as the centre of his own universe. But now (verse 16) this is no longer (verse 15) true. He no longer lives for himself; now he lives to please the one who loved him, who died ... and was raised again for

him. Christ, not Paul, is the new centre of Paul's universe; Paul's former egocentricity has given way to Christocentricity.

At his conversion, Paul realised, in an instant, that the glorified, crucified Christ could only be the Son of God who in death received God's curse. He realised that Christ was not a false Messiah, but the divinely appointed agent through whom forgiveness and reconciliation would be provided to sinful humanity. Paul's earlier views of Jesus were shallow and erroneous compared with the new and profound appreciation of Christ as the unique figure who alone was qualified to 'die for all'! Our forgiveness and reconciliation with God is only possible because of Christ's death on the cross.

Paul's reference to a new creation (verse 17) summarises the changes which occur within the life of any believer (anyone who turns to Christ). Love and denial of self are now (or certainly should be) the controlling motives.

The similarity of what Paul is saying to the creation narratives in Genesis is striking. It is implied that unbelievers (as Paul had been), are blind and live in a darkness analogous to the primal darkness of the first verses of the book of Genesis. Just as God spoke then, and there was light, so too God now speaks the gospel-word and once again there is light, though this gospel light is inward within the heart. By the word of God the world was made, and now, by the word of God, by the message of reconciliation, people are remade, recreated as new selves. In expressing the great and profound changes that occur in the life of anyone who is in Christ Paul not only affirms that there is a 'new covenant', there is also a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come (2 Corinthians 5:17).

Here Paul is telling us that our Almighty God has reconciled rebellious humankind to himself through Christ, the "one" of 2 Corinthians 5:14 whom he "made sin," on account of whom sins are no longer reckoned (2 Corinthians 5 verses 19 and 21). The "righteousness of God" imputed to those who are "in Christ" is the basis of their reconciliation to God.

God's "gift" of a "ministry of reconciliation," to whom he has entrusted his "word of reconciliation," must be seen as part of God's gift to the world, along with reconciliation, righteousness, and the Spirit. God himself addresses the world through the mouths of his apostles, who speak the word of reconciliation, "Be reconciled to God." So the apostle is God's partner and fellow worker, empowered by God, through whom God speaks.

Paul implores us to be reconciled to God. This is only possible because of Christ's sacrificial death on the cross. Nothing could be clearer than that Christ – crucified and risen – is the locus, the centrality and the means of fulfilling God's purposes for history, humanity, the world and creation.

So by the forgiveness of our sin in Christ God has reconciled us to himself. Here everything is from God. We did not ourselves placate God's wrath against our sins. Indeed we were completely unable to do so. So, God sent his son, who was completely free from sin, to die for us, and the forgiveness of our sins that Christ's death made possible made possible our reconciliation to God. Here Paul is telling us that our Almighty God has reconciled rebellious humankind to himself through Christ, the "one" of verse 14 whom he "made sin," on account of whom sins are no longer reckoned (verses 19 and 21). The "righteousness of God" imputed to those who are "in Christ" is the basis of their reconciliation to God.

So out of gratitude for the huge debt of sin from which we have been forgiven, a forgiveness which has enabled us to be reconciled to God and to enter into his kingdom, we deny ourselves. We say “No” to self and “Yes” to Christ, giving up our old self centred lives and becoming a new creation. Further, acknowledging all this, we take up our apostolic ministry of evangelism, bringing others to a real true knowledge of Christ and faith in him and so widening the reconciliation of mankind to God.

Paul speaks of similar matters to Timothy:

“10 ¶ You, however, know all about my teaching, my way of life, my purpose, faith, patience, love, endurance, 11 persecutions, sufferings—what kinds of things happened to me in Antioch, Iconium and Lystra, the persecutions I endured. Yet the Lord rescued me from all of them. 12 In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted, 13 while evil men and impostors will go from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived. 14 But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it, 15 and how from infancy you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. 16 All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, 17 so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work. 4:1 ¶ In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who will judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I give you this charge: 2 Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage—with great patience and careful instruction. 3 For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. 4 They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths. 5 But you, keep your head in all situations, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, discharge all the duties of your ministry. 6 For I am already being poured out like a drink offering, and the time has come for my departure. 7 I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. 8 Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day—and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing.” (2 Timothy 3:10-4:8 NIV)

Here Paul adds something to what we learned from 2 Corinthians. He’s saying that he has been persecuted and has suffered for his ministry. Christ has kept him safe and has sustained him through all of these trials, but nevertheless he has suffered. Indeed, Paul says that if we follow Christ we will be persecuted also. Jesus said much the same thing:

“18 ¶ "If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. 19 If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you. 20 Remember the words I spoke to you: ‘No servant is greater than his master.’ If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also. If they obeyed my teaching, they will obey yours also. 21 They will treat you this way because of my name, for they do not know the One who sent me.” (John 15:18-21 NIV)

In spite of this we need to address ourselves to study of God’s word, the Bible. Paul tells us that “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.” (2 Timothy 3:16)

Again, as he did in 2 Corinthians, Paul exhorts us to evangelism. He charges us all to preach the word, the word of God, with patience and careful instruction. As he says “For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear.” (2 Timothy 4:3). I’m afraid this time has already come, look at what the secular world is saying about homosexuality and transgender issues. Look at how the idea of absolute truth is denied in our post modern world. But Paul exhorts us to keep our heads and endure hardship and evangelise.

So we live in the light of the kingdom because Christ has secured the forgiveness of our sins through his salvific death on the cross and so reconciled us to God. We’ve been made part of God’s family and enabled to enter the kingdom as God’s children. Because of these stupendous blessings and benefits which God in his bounteous grace has freely bestowed on us, and because we will on that last day stand before the judgement seat of God, we deny ourselves and say “No” to self and “Yes” to Christ living as new creations, living lives worthy of the grace that has been bestowed on us. In this we lean on and rely on the Spirit, because in our own strength we cannot and will not succeed. We need the power of the Holy Spirit to overcome our weakness, temptations that besets us and the desires of the flesh. At the moment we turn to Christ in true faith, the Holy Spirit enters into us and begins the work of sanctification, the work of making us more Christ like. We are, or should be, made more Christ like day by day, until at the second coming we shall be completely remade in the image of Christ. We can co-operate in (or indeed resist) this work, but in the end it is mainly a work of the Holy Spirit.

In the meantime, in living this new life in Christ in the power of the Spirit we shall expect and endure persecution – just as Christ endured persecution for our sake. We will engage in a ministry of evangelism, widening the circle of reconciliation to God, by preaching the word ardently and faithfully at all times and in all places as the opportunity presents itself.

So living the life that our place in God’s kingdom merits involves denying our fleshly desires – as we saw with Alison last time – and taking up our crosses, following Christ and enduring the persecution that this world brings just as Christ, our example, did. Returning to the matter of rewards in heaven, Christ tells us that enduring this persecution will bring us rewards:

“10 Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. 11 "Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. 12 Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.” (Matthew 5:10-12 NIV)

Many Christians think that the idea of rewards in heaven is wrong or ignoble, but that is not what scripture teaches. Moses chose to suffer affliction with the people of God rather than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season because “he was looking ahead to his reward” (Hebrews 11:26). Even Jesus “who for the joy set before him endured the cross, ... and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God” (Hebrews 12:2). He said, “Rejoice ... for great is your reward in heaven.” as we saw in our reading from Matthew 5 a moment ago. So living the Christian life and enduring persecution will bring us rewards in heaven. I don’t know what those rewards will be, although I’m sure they will be far from the idea of material rewards we might think of in this life. Perhaps they will be spiritual, a particular closeness to the Lord. Or perhaps they will be increased responsibilities – note the parable of the talents (Matthew 25:14-30).

So let's live our lives in such a way as to gain and not lose us heavenly rewards – rewards that will be everlasting in the realm where moth and rust do not corrupt and our rewards cannot be stolen away (Matthew 6:19-20). Let's live our lives in such a way that on that last day when we stand before the judgement seat we might hear the words “Well done good and faithful servant” that were said to those servants who had faithfully used what God had given them in the parable of the talents. We definitely don't want to hear “I never knew you. Away from me you evildoers.” (Matthew 7:23) that were given to those who did not do God's will. So let's live lives worthy of the unfathomable grace and mercy God has given us in Christ.

Questions

1. What do you think the final result of our sanctification will be and will it be completed in this life?
2. Do you agree that Christians will be judged along with non-Christians and if so why?
3. What will be the outcome of this judgement for Christians and what will this judgement bring?
4. What do you think the nature of the rewards for Christians might be?
5. Why is it appropriate to describe Christians as a new creation?
6. Do you agree that Christians should expect to suffer persecution and if so why?
7. How should we respond to the grace and mercy God has extended us through the cross?