

Seek First the Kingdom of God

Christian Characteristics: Part One

Matthew 6:33

People seek many things within a lifetime. Some seek careers, some seek nice homes, some just want to be comfortable, some seek families, and most people seek happiness. This is not a strange principle because everybody seeks these things. In fact, God says that everybody seeks and even needs some physical things. In Matthew 6:32 it is written, *“For after all these things the Gentiles seek. For your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things.”* But let us consider, for a moment, what Jesus meant when He said, *“Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness.”* Was Jesus saying that we should not work to have food? Was He saying that we should not have any other interests in this life besides the kingdom? That was not His point. What He was saying, however, was that after a person has obeyed the gospel he is called upon by God to put the most important things first in his life. In this article we are going to consider how, exactly, one seeks first the kingdom.

What It Means to Seek First

In order for us to seek something it is necessary for us to place value in that thing. For the sportsman, the outdoors and the thrill of the hunt are very valuable, so he makes sure to leave time in his schedule to seek those things. In the recent Olympics there were young high school students, college students, and parents taking much time out of their schedules because they valued the prize of being the best. They were seeking the gold medal. But what do you seek? What do you value enough in your life that you are willing to sacrifice other things in order to achieve or care for? There may be several things that fit into that category for all of us. Fathers and mothers seek the wellbeing of their families. Husbands value their wives and wives value their husbands. These are all things that are important. But Jesus shows us that there is something that must rise far above all else in our hearts. He shows us what must be at the very top of our list.

To *seek first* means to value something far above all else in this life. Therefore we have passages such as 2 Corinthians 9:24 in which Paul tells us, *“Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may obtain it.”* In Hebrews 12:1-2 we are told, *“Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.”* If you watched the Olympics you will know that each of those athletes gave up many things in order to compete. They focused all their attentions to achieving their goal. People who value something that much do not allow little things to get in the way of their goal. Everything they do is determined by what they seek. Their schedule, what they fill their time with and what they give up. This is the picture Paul is trying to help us paint in our minds. This is the principle Jesus was referring to when He said, *“Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness.”*

Laying Aside Every Weight

In Hebrews 12:2 the Hebrew writer tells to lay aside every weight that hinders us from being faithful to God. Let us consider a few of God's servants who have done these very things. In Hebrews 11:8-10 it describes Abraham as a man who left his home and followed God's direction, not knowing where he was going because he looked for a city that was not made with hands. This is the man who was also willing to sacrifice his son in obedience to the will of God. What weights did Abraham have to lay aside in order to seek God this earnestly? Many of us are attached to home and to family, but God shows us through the life of Abraham that we must be willing to lay those things aside in order to seek first His kingdom. Jesus also tells us this in Matthew 10:37-39. In Daniel 3:13-23 Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego were willing to give up their very lives because they sought the righteousness of God so much. What did they have to lay aside in order to do this? Love for their own life, a desire to be liked by others, fear of persecution. These men sought first the kingdom of God and His righteousness and they showed it in their devotion. Finally, let us look at John the Baptist (Matthew 3:1, 4). Here was man who was willing to give up all the pleasures and comforts of this life so he could faithfully serve God. Now, God does not command us to do the same, but we see in John the willingness to lay those things aside in order to be faithful to God. He sought first the kingdom of God. What about you? Can you confidently say that you seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness? What are you willing to lay aside in order to enter into the kingdom of God?

The reason it is so important that we ask ourselves this is because men in our generation have become very adept at excusing themselves when they do not match up to God's standard. Many times the excuse has been made, "I can't go to church, I have to work. A man (woman) has to eat you know." In the greatness of human wisdom this excuse is given, in spite of the wisdom of God which says, "*Therefore do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For after all these things the Gentiles seek. For your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you*" (Matt. 6:30-33). We have also heard the excuse of "I'm just too busy." Brethren, we can be too busy to wash the dishes, we can be too busy to eat, we can be too busy to wash the car, but if we are truly seeking first the kingdom of God then we must never be too busy for spiritual matters; whether it be a Bible study, assembling with the saints, praying, or reading the Bible on our own. If there are things that hinder us from fulfilling these tasks, then let us consider them as weights that need to be cast off so that we can continue running our race. If we can only understand one thing from the Bible, let it be this: **God always comes first.**

First Things First

With these principles fresh in our minds let us now see how to seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness today.

First Give ourselves to the Lord. In 2 Corinthians 8:5 Paul commends the churches of Macedonia because they were not only willing to give of their money to help the churches of Judea, but they were first willing to give themselves to the Lord. "*And not only as we had hoped, but they first gave themselves to the Lord, and then to us by the will of God.*" We too must give ourselves first to the Lord; before our work, before our recreation, before our hobbies, and as much as this society may hate to hear it we must give ourselves to the Lord before our own families (if we love the Lord as we should, then we will also care for our families as we should).

There are many Christians willing to condemn others who do not give on the first day and who do not assemble regularly. Even though these things are important they are useless if we have not first given ourselves to the Lord. Therefore we must understand that as Christians we are here for God's service.

Clean first the inside (Matt. 23:26; 7:3-5). The scribes and Pharisees were sharply rebuked because though they demanded strict obedience to the Law their hearts were far from God and from seeking His righteousness. Babies in Christ must see in this the need to clean themselves of sinfulness. Make your heart right with God. As older Christians we must see in this the need to be examples of righteousness before rebuking others. It is very easy for us to become angry at our brethren for doing something wrong or for not doing something at all without realizing that we are in a worse spiritual state than they. Let us seek first the kingdom of God by making ourselves right first.

Zeal for the right Standard. For our final point let us understand that if we are seeking first the kingdom of God and His righteousness then we will have a great zeal for every good work. If being righteous is my top priority then I will not allow my fears hinder me from doing what I need to do. I will not make then I will be zealous to study the bible as much as I can. Instead of complaining about having to read two or three chapters per day we will be striving to read five or six. Instead of being too busy to go to bible study we would rather be too busy with bible studies to do other things. Let us continue to ponder these things and what is required of us.

Conclusion

In this day and age membership in a church has become more of an obligation we fulfill because it is good rather than a way of life. Churches today have become clubs that gather on a weekly basis; groups of people that smile and greet each other a couple times a week and ignore each other the rest of the time. Brethren, this is not the New Testament Church. If you are a Christian then know that seeking first the kingdom of God means devoting your life to it. If you are not a Christian, then understand that you can never be saved until you do devote your life to the kingdom of God. If you desire the salvation of Jesus Christ then will you come to Him on His terms: be baptized and live faithfully to Him?

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Poor In Spirit

Christian Characteristics: Part Two

We live in a world where men are only truly happy if they can get everything they want, if they never have to feel like they are wrong, and if they can feel like they are a step above everyone else. They tell themselves, “If I can just get to this point then perhaps I can be truly happy.” But what does Jesus say? “*Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of God*” (Matt. 5:3). If Christians were of the world, then they would seek happiness by trying to fulfill their own lusts and desires, but they are not of this world. They are the children of God and their home is in heaven. Therefore, Jesus teaches us that true happiness cannot come from fulfilling the lusts of the flesh, but serving God. By becoming poor in spirit we will know true happiness or blessedness. How can humbling ourselves make us happy? The Scriptures point out several reasons for this, all of which are very powerful if we are willing to accept them.

The Good Pleasure of His Goodness

If we love God then we are going to do all we can to please Him. But without a poor spirit this is impossible. That is why so much is written in the Scriptures concerning the poor in spirit, the humble, the meek, etc. “*Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; let him return to the LORD, and He will have mercy on him; and to our God, for He will abundantly pardon*” (Isa. 55:7). “*If My people who are called by My name will humble themselves, and pray and seek My face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land*” (2 Chron. 7:14). Essentially, the only way we can fulfill the good pleasure of God is by being poor in spirit. Without this attitude we will never fully learn to rely on Him, trust in Him with all of our heart, or submit fully to His will.

Our Own Blessedness Depends On It

On top of pleasing God, poorness of spirit is essential for our own happiness. Many people seek happiness, but are not willing to make the changes necessary to have true happiness. When we are poor in spirit then we readily acknowledge our shortcomings and admit that we need God, therefore seek the salvation that He offers. Thus Jesus said, “*Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners, to repentance*” (Mark 2:17). Without a proper understanding of our spiritual dependence upon God we cannot receive any of the blessings offered through the gospel of Christ. “*The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon Me, because the LORD has anointed Me to preach good tidings to the poor; He has sent Me to heal the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound*” (Isa. 61:1). The poor and captives in this passage are not referring to those literally in prison, though it can include them. Rather, it is referring to those who are spiritually poor because of sin, captives of their iniquities. When we realize what a horrible condition we are in, that we are poor and captive, then we can truly learn to rely upon God for our very life. The publican in the story of the *Pharisee and the Publican* in [Luke 18:11-14](#) is one example of what it means to be poor in spirit.

Why does the Lord only choose to send His blessings upon people in such a wretched state? The truth is, all men are in this wretched state, but only those who are willing to admit it can truly

appreciate what God offers through Christ. For this very reason Jesus said of the poor in spirit, *“Theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”*

Without being poor in spirit we can never be content. Only when we are poor in spirit will we understand that we do not deserve the comforts that we currently have. When we realize this then we can take joy in even the simplest of blessings, such as a cup of cold water. We will realize that God has already provided all we need, then we will understand that we don’t need to seek anything else besides His good will. *“Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God; and the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus” (Phil. 4:6-7).*

Being poor in spirit can also help us to overcome even the most stubborn sins. We will be willing to confess our sins one to another without letting pride get in our way. Then we can gain strength from Christ and from our brethren to overcome. It is pride that causes us to say, “But I’m embarrassed to go forward,” or “I don’t want anyone else to know what I did.” If the kingdom of God is first on our list of priorities then we will not let anything get in the way of our doing what is right.

Theirs is the Kingdom Of Heaven

We must not fail to see that Jesus places just as much emphasis on the blessings as He does the attitudes which result in those blessings. In this particular beatitude He used the present tense. If we are poor in spirit the kingdom of heaven is ours at this present time. Consider the words of J.W. McGarvey, “The poor in spirit not only shall have – they already have – the kingdom. The very sense of their poverty is begun riches. While others ‘walk in a vain show’ taking false views of themselves...and all around them, the poor in spirit are rich in the knowledge of their real case. Having courage to look this in the face, and own it guilelessly, they feel strong in the assurance that ‘unto the upright there ariseth light in the darkness’ (Ps. 112:4); and soon it breaks forth as the morning. God wants nothing from us as the price of His saving gifts; we have but to feel our universal destitution, and cast ourselves upon His compassion (1 John 1:9). So the poor in spirit are enriched with the fullness of Christ, which is the kingdom in substance; and when He shall say to them from His great white throne, ‘Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you,’ He will invite them merely to the full enjoyment of an already possessed inheritance.”

Not only do we look forward the future of the kingdom where we will put on an immortal body, but that kingdom belongs to those who are poor in spirit right now. We can have the peace of God which surpasses all understanding (Phil. 4:7). We will we have the ability to submit wholeheartedly to the will of God in faithful obedience trusting that no matter what we go through in this life, we have an eternal kingdom (Rom. 8:18).

A Great Cloud of Witnesses

God assures us of these things not only through His promises, but also through the examples of His servants who came before us. We can look to Abraham who was willing to live as a wonderer on the earth because he looked for the kingdom (Heb. 11:8). We can look to Joseph who trusted in God even though he was enslaved, mistreated, and wrongfully accused. He did not need to be made comfortable in this life because he was poor in spirit (Gen. 42:18). We can see the patience of Job, the humility of King David, the zeal of King Josiah, and the faith of John

the Baptist. All of these men submitting to the will of God, taking joy in the kingdom because they were poor in spirit.

Conclusion

We have seen that God only offers salvation to those who are willing to do what we have discussed in this lesson: admit our guilt, humble ourselves before Him, submit to His will, and walk before Him in faith and uprightness (Ps. 29:2). It is a difficult thing to let go of our pride, but Jesus says we will be blessed if we do.

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Blessed Are Those Who Mourn

Christian Characteristics: Part Three

The Pursuit of Happiness

Every person seeks happiness. Some seek it through a career. Some seek it through entertainment. Others seek it through comfort, security, friends or familiarity. Whatever we seek it through all men desire the feeling of inexpressible joy. Even the most depressed of men who seem to wallow in their self-pity can appreciate joy and happiness.

For most the grandest picture we can develop in our minds concerning joy a feeling—the feeling of being happy or comfortable. Many of us, in fact, are searching for no more than a feeling. “Perhaps if I do this I can get a glimpse of the feeling happiness.” If I can just make a little more money then I will feel better. If I could just be closer to my family, loose a little more weight, get what I want, do what I want, have people treat me better, then I will feel happy. This all seems harmless at first, but even while we were still young many of us resorted to sin, just to catch a glimpse of that joy. Then, by the time we find that little sliver of joy it is gone in a flash. Therefore it is described in the scriptures as, “*the passing pleasures of sin*” (Heb. 11:25).

Many men have spent their entire lives in this fruitless endeavor, trying this and trying that. Hours, days, even years are spent just trying to attain a level at which we can be happy. Then we die, never really finding true joy. Of this the preacher rightly commented saying,

Ecc. 1:2-4: “Vanity of vanities,’ says the Preacher; ‘Vanity of vanities, all is vanity.’ What profit has a man from all his labor in which he toils under the sun? One generation passes away, and another generation comes; but the earth abides forever.”

Ecc. 2:1-10: “I said in my heart, ‘Come now, I will test you with mirth; therefore enjoy pleasure’; but surely, this also was vanity. I said of laughter – ‘Madness!’; and of mirth, ‘What does it accomplish?’ I searched in my heart how to gratify my flesh with wine, while guiding my heart with wisdom, and how to lay hold on folly, till I might see what was good for the sons of men to do under heaven all the days of their lives. I made my works great, I built myself houses, and planted myself vineyards. I made myself gardens and orchards, and I planted all kinds of fruit trees in them. I made myself water pools from which to water the growing trees of the grove. I acquired male and female servants, and had servants born in my house. Yes, I had greater possessions of herds and flocks than all who were in Jerusalem before me. I also gathered for myself silver and gold and the special treasures of kings and of the provinces. I acquired male and female singers, the delights of the sons of men, and musical instruments of all kinds. So I became great and excelled more than all who were before me in Jerusalem. Also my wisdom remained with me. Whatever my eyes desired I did not keep from them. I did not withhold my heart from any pleasure, for my heart rejoiced in all my labor.”

And so we spend a lifetime searching for happiness on the earth and what do we find? Vanity How can this be? “God is great. God is loving. He wants me to be happy. He gave us this creation so that we can enjoy it and be happy,” many have said in exasperation. To a point, this is true. God wants us to be happy, but we cannot find our happiness by perusing the vain things of this life. Yes we are given what we need to be sustained. Yes we are taken care of. But we are given these things, not because we are able to find true joy and happiness from them, but so that we may use them to seek God and find happiness in Him. Therefore the apostle Paul said to those in Lystra, “*Nevertheless He did not leave Himself without witness, in that He did good, gave us rain from heaven and fruitful seasons, filling our hearts with food*

and gladness,” and to those in Athens, “So that they should seek the Lord, in the hope that they might grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us; for in Him we live and move and have our being, as also some of your own poets have said, ‘For we are also His offspring.’” We were not meant to find true joy in this creation, but to use our blessings to seek the living God.

We are created in the image of God. We have a physical body, but it is our spirit that makes us alive. God is spirit and He breathed in us the breath of life (Gen. 2:7). When this physical body is destroyed our spirit will remain, either in eternal life or in eternal condemnation depending on the works that we do. But just as sin, this physical body is passing. Therefore when we seek happiness in this life we are seeking after that which is here and is gone in a breath. But true happiness, true joy, can only be found in our eternal creator. **True happiness is not a mere feeling but a condition of our heart!**

Blessed are those who Mourn: This is why we can spend our entire lives searching for it and never attain it. But Jesus offers us a solution. In the Sermon on the Mount He shows who will be blessed before the Father. “*Blessed are the poor in spirit...Blessed are those who mourn...Blessed are the meek.*” The word *blessed* literally means, “supremely blessed, fortunate, well off, happy” (Strong’s). In essence it is prolonged happiness. In the context of our relationship with our heavenly Father it is eternal happiness. When we fulfill what Jesus describes in these seven beatitudes then we are eternally happy. Yet we must note again that this form of happiness is not a mere feeling, though it can cause the feeling of happiness. It is a condition of the heart. Even though we suffer we can be truly happy if our joy is in heaven.

Jesus tells us that those who mourn are blessed. To some this may not make any sense. After all, how can we be mourning and still be happy? For the same reason a body builder can workout to the point of fatigue and still become stronger. For the same reason a person must admit his sickness before he can be healed by the physician. For the same reason Jesus was able to look for the joy set before Him even though He was dieing on the cross (Heb. 12:2).

So long as we are alive in this flesh we are going to sin from time to time. As a result we must rely solely upon the grace of our God if we are going to be saved. But God will only save those who humble themselves before Him. He will only lift of the faint hearted. He will only comfort those who are willing to mourn over their sins and the sins of the world, acknowledge their need for Him and ask His forgiveness. David was a man after God’s own heart. He had the promise of his descendant being set upon God’s eternal throne. Yet let us read some of His Psalms.

Psalm 32:1-7: “*Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. Blessed is the man to whom the LORD does not impute iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no deceit. When I kept silent, my bones grew old through my groaning all the day long. For day and night Your hand was heavy upon me; my vitality was turned into the drought of summer. Selah. I acknowledged my sin to You, and my iniquity I have not hidden. I said, ‘I will confess my transgressions to the LORD,’ and You forgave the iniquity of my sin. Selah. For this cause everyone who is godly shall pray to You in a time when You may be found; surely in a flood of great waters they shall not come near him. You are my hiding place; you shall preserve me from trouble; you shall surround me with songs of deliverance.*”

Psalm 40:1-5: “*I waited patiently for the LORD; and He inclined to me, and heard my cry. He also brought me up out of a horrible pit, out of the miry clay, and set my feet upon a rock, and established my steps. He has put a new song in my mouth -- praise to our God; many will see it and fear, and will trust in the LORD. Blessed is that man who makes the LORD his trust, and does not respect the proud, nor such as turn aside to lies. Many, O LORD my God, are Your wonderful works which You have done; and Your thoughts toward us cannot be recounted to You in order; if I would declare and speak of them, they are more than can be numbered.*”

David did not find happiness by glorifying himself, puffing himself up, or seeking the pleasures of this earth. Rather, he humbled himself before God, mourned over his sins, wept on account of his iniquities

and found comfort in the hands of the Lord. It does not matter how we feel, all men are in this pit on account of our sins. But only those who are willing to lay their iniquities upon the Lord will be brought up out of that pit. Only those who are willing to lay aside their selfishness will be able to find the eternal joy of the Lord. Brethren, when we are able to do this then we too can proclaim the words of Habakkuk, *“Though the fig tree may not blossom, nor fruit be on the vines; though the labor of the olive may fail, and the fields yield no food; though the flock may be cut off from the fold, and there be no herd in the stalls -- yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will joy in the God of my salvation”* (Hab. 3:17-19).

Conclusion

In just a matter of time we will have lived our life and then we will die. But after this will be an eternal life. What we do now will determine what that life will be like. If we are willing to lay our sins before God and walk no more in the ways of unrighteousness then we can have joy beyond measure. Therefore, *“blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.”* The comfort will be from God, there blessedness in His salvation. By this it can be said of us. *“In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while... though it is tested by fire, may be found to praise, honor, and glory at the revelation of Jesus Christ, whom having not seen you love. Though now you do not see Him, yet believing, you rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory, receiving the end of your faith -- the salvation of your souls”* (1 Pet. 1:6-9). Will you come?

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Meekness

Christian Characteristics: Part Four

In Matthew 11:28-30 Jesus invites all who labor and are heavy laden to come to Him. In coming to Him He also says that we must “learn from Him, for He is meek and lowly of Spirit.” Summed up, this is the purpose of Christian life: to learn from Jesus. We are disciples and the definition of disciple is “learner” or “follower.” Let us notice that Christ invites us to have a certain characteristic: Meekness. In this we can see the necessary transformation that must take place from the arrogance and selfishness that is in the world, to the gentiles and self sacrifice that permeates God’s people. Let us set forth to learn this characteristic in order that we may walk as Jesus walked (1 John 2:6).

Definition of the Term

Truth be told, there is no accurate English translation for the word from which we get “meekness.” The English word often takes on the meaning of weak, cowardice, the picture of a child quivering in the corner. However, there is no such idea in the Greek word. In fact, the meekness that is expected of Christians is more the result of spiritual strength rather than weakness. Thayer defines the Greek as “mildness of disposition, gentleness of Spirit, meek.” It is in the light of this gentle spirit that great men such as Moses and Jesus are viewed in the Bible. When we consider it, to be meek, gentle, and lowly in spirit requires much more strength and courage than the opposite. It is not the manifestation of fear, but the absence of arrogance. To be meek is to be humble. “Meekness involves being gentle, humble, considerate, courteous and therefore exercising self-control” (Dunagan).

The Strength of Meekness

Which takes more self-control: To keep one’s self composed and quiet when slandered by another, or to fly off the cuff and pummel the back-biter? Which takes more strength, to be willing to show kindness to those who hate you or to hate in return? Without contest to show self-control in such times requires far greater strength than allowing our feelings to control our every action. It was this strength that Moses had then Aaron and Miriam grumbled against him and against God in Numbers 12:1-3. It was this strength that Jesus had when hanging on the cross for our sins. It is this strength that we are expected to have when we are commanded by the Lord. For, it is our meekness that will cause us to submit to His will. Many today slander the word of God by saying it is imperfect, out of date, incomplete, or not a law book. But it is meekness that allows us to understand that if we want to please God then, like Jesus, we must learn obedience as dear children ([Heb. 5:8](#); [Eph. 5:1](#)).

As with all of the beatitudes meekness is essential for doing things God’s way, or in a way that pleases God. One does not love righteousness if they do not “mourn” over sins. One will not humble themselves before God if they are not poor in spirit. In the same manner it is impossible for a person to fully understand God’s word, treat other people the way God expects and submit to God without being meek. When we think and behave with meekness Jesus says we will inherit the earth because only when we are meek are we willing to be submissive. Only then will we behave like true children of God ([James 3:13](#)).

The Meekness of Moses

[Numbers 12:1-9](#): Though Moses had the authority to rebuke Aaron and Miriam for their irreverence he simply kept silent ([Num. 12:1-9](#)). However, his silence was not from personal weakness, for consider his reaction to the golden calf in [Ex. 32:19-20, 25-28](#) and his pleading with God in [Ex. 32:30-32](#). Moses was not a spineless coward. Rather, his meekness was the result of a humble and gentle spirit! How do we know this? Consider again the incident with the golden calf. Was the worship of the calf an offense directed against Moses or God? God! Look at his writings in the book of Deuteronomy. Were his rebukes

in that book concerning sins against him or against God? Against God! Now, consider the incident with Miriam and Aaron again. Was this an attack directed at Moses or God? It was against Moses. Therefore Moses was meek because he knew that whatever authority God gave him it was not because of his own righteousness, but by the grace of God. Therefore he fulfilled exactly what Paul describes in Rom. 12:17-19. *“Repay no one evil for evil. Have regard for good things in the sight of all men...Beloved, do not avenge yourselves, but rather give place to wrath; for it is written, ‘Vengeance is Mine, I will repay,’ says the Lord.”* In order to fully understand God’s word we must have the meekness to submit to everything it says. In order to *“be the servant of all”* (Mark 9:35) we must put on meekness. When we are meek then we will realize that we are not too good to suffer for Christ (Matt. 10:25-26). We will realize that whatever level of righteousness we have attained it is not enough, and it was not attained by our own abilities, but God’s. All in all, we cannot be a true servant of God if we are not meek.

The Meekness of a Christian

How can we know whether or not we are meek? Simply put, *“You shall know them by their fruits”* (Matt. 7:16). How do we respond when men persecute us, speak evil of us and curse us? If we are striving for meekness then we will show the same Character that Moses did. As Jesus put it, *“But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven; for He makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. For if you love those who love you, what reward have you? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet your brethren only, what do you do more than others? Do not even the tax collectors do so? Therefore you shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect”* (Matt. 5:44-48).

When we see a brother in sin it is often our cowardice or fear of hurting one’s feelings that keeps us from offering correction. But meekness first of all causes us to put the will of God before our own feelings. Second it is the character with which we offer the correction to those who need it. Too often we puff ourselves up when we see a brother in sin. *“Can you believe they would do such a thing?”* As a result, we either choose to gossip rather than taking our concerns to that person, or when we take our concern we do it in such a way that we puff ourselves up against them. We are therefore commanded, *“Brethren, if a man is overtaken in any trespass, you who are spiritual restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness”* (Gal. 6:1). This *“spirit of gentleness”* is the meekness that we have been discussing.

It is also with this meekness that we live with our brethren. When we are meek then we are willing to submit ourselves to taking care of the needs of others. When we are meek then we will understand that our needs are nothing compared to our neighbors. Therefore Paul commands us in Rom. 12:9-16, *“Let love be without hypocrisy. Abhor what is evil. Cling to what is good. Be kindly affectionate to one another with brotherly love, in honor giving preference to one another; not lagging in diligence, fervent in spirit, serving the Lord; rejoicing in hope, patient in tribulation, continuing steadfastly in prayer; distributing to the needs of the saints, given to hospitality. Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep. Be of the same mind toward one another. Do not set your mind on high things, but associate with the humble. Do not be wise in your own opinion.”*

None of this is possible for us to accomplish if we do not have the lowly spirit of Jesus. If we were still in the world we would be too proud to give our brethren the preference. If we still walked according to the flesh we would be too angry to wait for God to take vengeance upon those who do evil to us. But we are not in the world. Jesus has freed us from these carnal desires and tendencies. He has shown us the ultimate example of meekness in that, even though He had the power to summon twelve legions of angels to fight for Him (Matt. 26:53), He chose rather to go *“as a sheep to the slaughter; and as a lamb before its shearer is silent, so He opened not His mouth”* (Acts 8:32).

Coming out of the World

We have said it once and we will say it again. Without meekness there is no way that we will be able to submit to the will of God. There are many doctrines in the world that teach us that “The Bible is incomplete,” “We don’t have to do everything the Bible says,” “You can go to the church of your choice.” Dear reader, please consider that these very doctrines are spread by men and women whom the Bible describes as being carnal, puffed up, and giving in to the doctrines of demons and that God is fighting against such (2 Cor. 10:4-6; 1 Tim. 4:1; 2 Tim. 3:8). It is our own human pride that causes us to believe we can go to the church of our choice. It is our arrogance that causes us to believe that we can live without the counsel of God. However, if you want to please God; if you want to be able to say that you know God and that you are a faithful servant of God then cast of these false doctrines. Follow Christ’s example of meekness who said in every instance, “God’s will be done.” Meekness helps us to understand that *“There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way of death”* (Prov. 16:25), and that *“Blessed are the undefiled in the way, who walk in the law of the LORD! Blessed are those who keep His testimonies, who seek Him with the whole heart”* (Ps. 119:1-2). Only when we are meek will we be able to enjoy all the blessings that the Lord has given us. Therefore it is written, *“Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth”* (Matt. 5:5).

Will you submit to the will of God? Will you come up to Him in a spirit of humility and submission? He is calling (Matt. 11:28-30).

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Hunger and Thirst for Righteousness

Christian Characteristics: Part Five

A characteristic that defines God's people is an undying hunger and thirst for the righteousness for His righteousness. Noah sought the righteousness of God in spite of an evil generation. Abraham, Joseph, Moses, Joshua all sought God and His righteousness. We too can be blessed as these men were if we hunger and thirst after righteousness. But before we say that this applies to us we must understand one very important thing: our desire too must be for the righteousness of God.

The True Righteousness

Many people seek after righteousness. When the attacks were made on our country in 2001 Bin Laden was hungering for the righteousness of his religion. When the denominations start their human organizations and send great numbers of people into 3rd world countries with food and clothing in the name of the church they are hungering after their own form of righteousness. When the evolutionists protest the mention of God in our schools and in our government they hunger after their form of righteousness. But all of these standards of righteousness are far from being God's. They are as the Jews in Paul's day of whom he said, "*For I bear them witness that they have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge. For they being ignorant of God's righteousness, and seeking to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted to the righteousness of God. For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes*" (Rom. 10:2-4). In a world where the standard to be followed is self, we are in great danger of falling into this same trap if we do not keep our eyes open and hold fast (1 Thess. 5:1-7).

True righteousness where our faith and our service for God become our daily sacrifice not to be moved by matters of convenience and worldly pleasures. It is a righteousness where the weakest member in a congregation becomes the greatest priority to the entire body (1 Cor. 12:20-26). It is a righteousness that causes a person to be willing to give up all just to ensure the well being of a brother or sister in Christ (1 John 3:16); a righteousness where the word of God is of more value than treasures, even than food! This is a righteousness that places a person's relationship with God and with His people at greater importance than anything this world can offer. This is a righteousness that causes a person to say in their heart the words of the Psalmist in Psalm 119:10-16, "*With my whole heart I have sought You; oh, let me not wander from Your commandments! Your word I have hidden in my heart, that I might not sin against You. Blessed are You, O LORD! Teach me Your statutes. With my lips I have declared all the judgments of Your mouth. I have rejoiced in the way of Your testimonies, as much as in all riches. I will meditate on Your precepts, and contemplate Your ways. I will delight myself in Your statutes; I will not forget Your word.*"

Hunger and Thirst

This, brethren is what Jesus meant when He said, “*Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness*” (Matt. 5:6). This is who Jesus was describing when He said, “*For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it*” (Matt. 16:25). But this is not what the world wants to hear. That is why they are being lost. But blessed are those who not only agree with these words, but who so desire them in their own life that it creates a great emptiness that must be filled. In our nation today many of us do not know hunger. Granted, some may have had to live on scant food till the next pay check. Some of use may have even had the self-control to go hungry for a while in an attempt to loose a few extra pounds. But let us consider the hunger that people knew in Jesus’ day and age. It was a hunger caused by a poverty that allowed meat to pass their lips once a week, at most. It was a hunger that lasted from morning till evening for weeks on end. It was a hunger that persisted during hard labor and during rest. Many of the people who Jesus taught knew this hunger. They knew what it felt like. At times it seems our nation could use a good bout of hunger to help us understand. But brethren, when Jesus said, “*Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness,*” this is the feeling He was talking about, but in a spiritual sense.

When you look at the world what is in your heart. Paul’s hunger for righteousness cause his spirit to be provoked within him as he walked among the idols in Athens (Acts 17:16). Jesus’ hunger for righteousness drove Him into the temple where He turned the tables of the money changers and drove out them crying out the word of the Lord saying, “*My house is a house of prayer, but you have made it a den of thieves*” (Matt. 21:13). What about you? When you see the sin in the world does it provoke your spirit? When you see a brother or sister in sin do you feel a sense of urgency that makes you yearn to pull them out of the fire (Jude 23)? If you truly hunger and thirst for righteousness then you will.

How Far Will You Go?

To many this lesson may seem a little intense. But let us step back and take a look at the teachings of Christ. How far must we be willing to go for the righteousness of God? Jesus tells us unto death. “*Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake. Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you*” (Matt. 5:10-12). How many of us are willing to die for something as trivial as new shirt or a new TV? Not many. Why? Because we just do not love it that much. We would could always find another somewhere else if we really wanted to. For many this is the approach that they have taken toward the righteousness of God and the kingdom of God. It has become a matter of convenience that they know is good do consider, but if need be I can just put it a side for a moment until I take care of something. Brethren, it ought not to be so! Our very existence depends on the attitude with which we approach our God (Lev. 10:1-3). How far are you willing to go to fulfill you hunger and thirst for righteousness? Understand that this is a fourfold obligation.

1. We must seek the righteousness of God in our hearts. For many to go to church once on Sunday is all they need to feel right with God. But the heart of a servant seeks God at all times. As we have read in the Psalms, we must be willing to commit our heart to learning, understanding and applying the word of God. We must seek to make our attitudes right with Him; toward our brethren, toward God and His commandments and toward ourselves.

2. We must also seek this righteousness in our actions as well. Many people have a desire to do better, but we never see the effects of that in their lives. Let us hunger in such a way that we may be willing to fulfill the righteousness of God in our lives.

2. We must long for this righteousness in those around us. It was Jeremiah's hunger that caused him to feel what was revealed in the book of Lamentations. It was Jesus' hunger that cause Him to mourn over Jerusalem in Matthew 23. It was Paul's hunger that caused Him to want to see his brethren saved according to Rom. 9:1-5. We too must desire this righteousness in those around us, for God's sake and for theirs. That is why we are commanded to go to our brethren when they are in sin. That is why we are commanded in Jude 23 "*...but others save with fear, pulling them out of the fire, hating even the garment defiled by the flesh.*" It is also this righteousness that causes us to have compassion on our loved ones as well as our enemies (Matt. 5:43-48).

4. Finally, this desire ought to manifest itself in our pursuit for justice. There are a great many doctrines today that strive to diminish the significance of the Lord's judgment. Some go so far to say that it is just a tool to scare us into a better way of living, but God would not actually send any one to hell. If God is a just and righteousness God then He will punish the disobedient (Romans 2:5-10). If we hunger for righteousness then we will understand this. We ought not to desire to see any man perish, but our desire for righteousness ought to make us increasingly aware of the coming judgment. What about you?

Conclusion

Those who hunger and thirst after righteousness are blessed because they will be filled. Those who hunger after sin, pleasure, worldly comfort, power, beauty, etc. will never be filled. They will spend a life time seeking and then they will die. But we must set our hearts on greater things. Our hunger can be filled now as we grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and as we search His word. It will ultimately be filled when Christ comes and we receive the fullness of His glory. Let us strive to attain that glory. Will you come? Mark 16:16.

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Blessed Are The Merciful

Christian Characteristics: Part Six

In the fifth beatitude in the Sermon on the Mount Jesus says, “*Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy*” (Matthew 5:7). Concerning this mercy every Christian ought to understand and constantly ponder: we were once dead in our sins, we were without God in the world, destitute, and defiled but God had mercy on us. If you are not yet a Christian than know that this same mercy is available for all who come to God. But if we want to obtain God’s mercy, we must also show mercy. Just as God showed compassion toward us, so we must do for our fellow man.

Mercy Is Forgiving

It is because of the mercy of God that we can be forgiven of our sins; therefore we must also forgive others. Concerning this principle Jesus’ disciples questioned Him saying, “*How often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him?*” (Matthew 18:21). Jesus answered with this parable. “*I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven. Therefore the kingdom of heaven is like a certain king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. And when he had begun to settle accounts, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents. But as he was not able to pay, his master commanded that he be sold, with his wife and children and all that he had, and that payment be made. The servant therefore fell down before him, saying, ‘Master, have patience with me, and I will pay you all.’ Then the master of that servant was moved with compassion, released him, and forgave him the debt. But that servant went out and found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii; and he laid hands on him and took him by the throat, saying, ‘Pay me what you owe!’ So his fellow servant fell down at his feet and begged him, saying, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you all.’ And he would not, but went and threw him into prison till he should pay the debt. So when his fellow servants saw what had been done, they were very grieved, and came and told their master all that had been done. Then his master, after he had called him, said to him, ‘You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you begged me. Should you not also have had compassion on your fellow servant, just as I had pity on you?’ And his master was angry, and delivered him to the torturers until he should pay all that was due to him*” (Matthew 18:22-34).

Jesus summarized this principle in Matthew 6:14. Therefore, forgive those who sin against you, for their debt is nothing compared to yours, yet your heavenly Father is still willing to forgive you. Remember Christ’s mercy and walk in His steps.

Mercy Loves Its Enemies

It is because of the mercy of God that Christ died for His enemies, as it is written, “*And you, who once were alienated and enemies in your mind by wicked works, yet now He has reconciled in the body of His flesh through death, to present you holy, and blameless, and above reproach in His sight*” (Colossians 2:21-22). And again, “*But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us*” (Romans 5:8). Therefore we must also love our enemies, just as Jesus also commands us. “*...love your enemies, bless those who curse you,*

do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven... Therefore you shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect” (Matthew 7:44-48). When your enemies revile you, do you bless them in return? When your neighbor gossips about you, do you pray for them? When someone takes something from you do you give to them beyond what they desired of you? The world in its selfishness would avoid such actions, but we are of God. Therefore we are commanded in Matthew 5:16, *“Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven.”* This is the mercy that Christ has upon us; let us walk in His footsteps.

Mercy Is Compassionate to Physical Needs

It is because of the mercy of God that we are richly blessed in this world. Whatever need we have He cares for. God showed mercy toward His servant, Elijah, when He sent the ravens to feed him in the wilderness in 1 Kings 17:2-7. He had mercy upon Israel when He brought forth water from the rock (Exodus 17), and sent the manna and the quail for sustenance in the wilderness (Exodus 16:9ff; Numbers 11:31ff). Even so He shows mercy on each one of us every time we eat a morsel of food to fill our hunger, take a drink of water to quench our thirst, or put on a coat to protect us from the elements. By this the scripture is continually fulfilled which states, *“Behold, the eye of the LORD is on those who fear Him, on those who hope in His mercy, to deliver their soul from death, and to keep them alive in famine”* (Psalm 33:18-19). In this manner we too are to be merciful to our neighbors and brethren. Therefore it is written in 1 John 3:16-18, *“By this we know love, because He laid down His life for us. And we also ought to lay down our lives for the brethren. But whoever has this world’s goods, and sees his brother in need, and shuts up his heart from him, how does the love of God abide in him? My little children, let us not love in word or in tongue, but in deed and in truth.”*

The Lord shows mercy toward us by taking care of our physical needs; let us walk in His footsteps. When we are merciful in this way then we shall obtain this mercy from our Lord in this life, and in the life to come.

Mercy Is Conditional

Let us also understand that the mercy of God is that of truth and righteousness. His mercy does not condone sin, but teaches men to come out of sin. True, God *“...raises the poor from the dust and lifts the beggar from the ash heap, to set them among princes and make them inherit the throne of glory”* (1 Samuel 2:8). But to those who walk in iniquity and do not walk in the way of the Lord, His mercy will be withheld. Within the volume of scripture it is written, *“The LORD is longsuffering and abundant in mercy, forgiving iniquity and transgression; but He by no means clears the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and fourth generation”* (Numbers 14:18). Jeremiah writes concerning Israel in Jeremiah 5:24-25 saying, *“They do not say in their heart, ‘Let us now fear the LORD our God, who gives rain, both the former and the latter, in its season. He reserves for us the appointed weeks of the harvest.’ Your iniquities have turned these things away, and your sins have withheld good from you.”* When we turn and repent of our sins God is faithful to forgive us, but so long as we continue in them He will not! His mercy is upon sinners now because He waits; in His patience He withholds His wrath for a time that they may have another opportunity to turn and repent (2 Pet. 3:9). But when His patience has run out and His wrath is unleashed in the day of the Lord in fiery judgment

those who do not obey the gospel will be lost for eternity; they will not receive one ounce of His mercy.

Righteous mercy does not forgive those who do not repent. It does not allow those in error to remain in error. *“He shall send from heaven and save me; He reproaches the one who would swallow me up. God shall send forth His mercy and His truth”* (Psalm 57:3). Let us therefore understand that we must be merciful as God is merciful. But His mercy does not teach that we should turn our eyes when a brother is in sin. For there are many deceivers in the world teaching that we must show mercy to those in adultery by allowing them to live in their sin without question. They teach that we should give to those who will not work and heal those who will not give up their destructive ways. Brethren, this is not the mercy of God, but the deception of Satan.

Jesus shows how to have mercy on those living in sin in Matthew 18:15-17; by confronting their sin and taking the necessary steps to convict them and bring them to repentance. Paul also instructs us concerning this matter in 1 Cor. 5:4-5 saying, *“In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, when you are gathered together, along with my spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus Christ, deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus.”* Our mercy toward those living in sin is seen in our efforts to bring them back to the Lord, not in ignoring their inevitable destruction. Therefore Jude instructed us in verses 22 and 23 of his letter, *“And on some have compassion, making a distinction; but others save with fear, pulling them out of the fire, hating even the garment defiled by the flesh”* (Jude 22-23).

Jesus showed us how to be merciful to the physical needs of our neighbors. But we are also told, *“For even when we were with you, we commanded you this: If anyone will not work, neither shall he eat. For we hear that there are some who walk among you in a disorderly manner, not working at all, but are busybodies. Now those who are such we command and exhort through our Lord Jesus Christ that they work in quietness and eat their own bread”* (2 Thessalonians 3:10-12). The mercy of God is the result of love, righteousness and godliness and it accompanies those who are of God. Therefore it does not indulge sinfulness or laziness, rather it teaches men to leave those things and come to God, Just as Jesus said, *“Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven”* (Matthew 5:16).

Conclusion

Do you desire the mercy of God? Then consider the example of the publican in Luke 18:13-14. *“And the tax collector, standing afar off, would not so much as raise his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me a sinner!’ I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.”* All of us must because like this publican if we are to receive forgiveness. We must humble ourselves before Him and submit to His will. We must be merciful toward the sins of others, toward our enemies and toward those in need. Let our mercy reflect that of our Father in Heaven, then we will, in turn, obtain His mercy. When we repent of our sins Jesus then says, *“He who believes and is baptized shall be saved...”* (Mark 16:16). Will you come?

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