

Living the Christian Life

Lesson 2

Living By God's Ways

Course Overview – Two Objectives

By way of introduction for those of you who missed the introductory class last week, JS focuses on the basic disciplines of the Christian life. So the primary objective of the class is to answer the question, “What does it mean to live as a Christian?” “How does God speak to me?” “How do I talk to him?” “What is the church?” “And how am I to engage the world with the good news of Jesus Christ?” These are the kinds of practical topics we’ll be addressing over the following 6 weeks.

I. Living by God's Ways: Introduction

Last week, we laid the foundation for understanding the miracle of our salvation. We spent some time, primarily in Ephesians and Titus looking at our condition apart from Christ. And the two images we spent some time discussing were that of a slave and a corpse. And we saw how God, in spite of our helpless condition initiates and completes the work of salvation: That salvation is, from first to last, a work of God.

And important for today's class is that we learned that God doesn't save us so that we can have fire insurance and go about living our lives as we please. Rather, God saves us for His glory. This leads us to today's topic where we consider what it means to live by God's ways. This is really the next logical theme as we try to accomplish this class' primary objective, and should help lay the foundation for the next several classes as we highlight the issues of communicating with God, being a part of God's family, and living gospel-centered lives in the world.

II. Living by God's Ways: Our calling

We mentioned last week that God doesn't merely save us so that we can be free from His wrath, but rather he saves us to glorify himself. So, If negatively, we are saved from God's wrath, then positively, we're saved to glorify God. And, as we consider what it means to live by God's ways, it's helpful to begin our time this morning by highlighting the lives we are called to live as Christians.

We discussed last week that our lives apart from Christ are marked by essentially a self orientation, where we live for ourselves, not for God, are hostile towards Him and other people. But when we become Christians that all changes.

We read throughout the New Testament that not only are we saved from God's just wrath, but we are also saved to glorify God and to live a new life.

- I Peter 2:9, **“But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.**

- Ephesians 1:4, **“For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight.”**

- Ephesians, 2:10, **“For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.”**

From these three verses alone, we see that we are chosen to declare the praises of God, to be holy and blameless, and we are created to do good works.

Yet, as we think about such things, we are confronted with a problem: in our natural condition, we've seen how we're described apart from Christ: slaves to sin, dead in our transgressions... So, the question arises...

Q: How then are we able to live up to our calling to be holy, to do works that glorify God, and to declare His praises? How is it even possible?

A: Well, in short, and as we'll develop a little more fully today, when we are converted, God completes an initial cleansing work in us, making a decisive break with the patterns of sin in our lives that we discussed last week:

- I Cor. 6:11, After reminding the Corinthian Christians of their former way of life, Paul writes, **“But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.”**

This truth enables Paul to write in 2 Cor 5:17, **“Therefore if any man is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things have passed away; behold, new things have come.”** So, as Christians we're no longer slaves to sin and dead to the things of God.

Through Christ's work on the cross and by the power of the Holy Spirit, God takes us, who were dead, and makes us new creations. He just doesn't bandage us up, but, rather, breathes new life into us.

And, as we mentioned last week, we can have confidence that God will complete the work of salvation in our lives. Remember, it's not ultimately us, who by our own efforts make ourselves holy and sanctify ourselves. But rather it's God, by the finished work of Christ, through the Holy Spirit, who works in us to complete the work of salvation in our lives.

(I Thessalonians 5:23-24, Philippians 1:6, 2 Corinthians 1:21-22)

And, as new creations, we have the “privileged obligation” of living, not as we used to live apart from Christ, but as those who have been redeemed. As a member of GRBC, every time we take communion, we should acknowledge this obligation –

We should seek, by Divine aid, to live carefully in the world, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, and remembering that, as we have been voluntarily buried by baptism and raised again from the symbolic grave, so there is on us a special obligation now to lead a new and holy life.

III. Living by God's Ways... Three characteristics of our new life in Christ

As we begin this morning, we should note three characteristics of our new lives in Christ when God converts us and seals us with the Holy Spirit that are vital to understanding how we can possibly live a life that pleases God. To help us with this we're going to look at a couple passages in Romans, which I've printed for you on your handout.

New Nature/Mindset, Romans 8:5-8

“Those who live according to the sinful nature have their minds set on what that nature desires; but those who live in accordance with the Spirit have their minds set on what the Spirit desires. The mind of sinful man is death, but the mind controlled by the Spirit is life and peace; the sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so. Those controlled by the sinful nature cannot please God.”

Q: What is the primary difference here between a Christian and non-Christian?

A: The phrase according to that Paul uses, when he makes the distinction between those who live according to the flesh or Spirit, indicates a person's fundamental essence, bent, or disposition.

We know from other parts of Scripture (Galatians 5) that those who live according to the sinful nature or the flesh, in other words, those who are controlled by sin, manifest works of the flesh: Greed, anger, sexual sin, envy, deceit...some of the things we mentioned last week.

In reality, before we are Christians, we act in such ways because our nature has not been changed and therefore our mindset, or the things we desire/and our affections, is oriented to the things of the sinful nature. And Paul says in verse 7, the sinful, or unspiritual, mind is hostile to God and doesn't submit to God because it can't, it is unable to do so, it doesn't have the means to do so.

But those who live in accordance with the Spirit, literally those who are saved, indwelt by the Holy Spirit, given a new nature, they now operate under a completely different mindset, one that is alive to what the Spirit desires. To say it a different way, we now desire and have affection for the things of God.

Q: In the context of the lives we are supposed to live as Christians (holy, etc...) why is understanding the new nature God has given us important?

A: He's not making demands on us that we ultimately cannot fulfill, and importantly, that we have no desire to fulfill. He's changed our hearts so that we desire now to obey, not simply out of obligation or fear, but out of affection and love for God and His commands.

We are of the Spirit and now desire what the Spirit desires.

Which brings me to the second characteristic of our new life in Christ...because we have been given a new nature and, as Ephesians 2 puts it, “been made alive with Christ,” we are now...

Dead to and Freed from...Sin, Romans 6:1-2, 6-7

Given our emphasis last week on the fact that apart from Christ, we are in reality a spiritual corpse --- dead to the things of God, and a slave to sin, it's important to note that as Christian neither of those two things now describe us.

Q: On your handout, I've put a few verses from Romans 6, Could I get someone to read these verses?

"1What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? 2By no means! We died to sin; how can we live in it any longer?...6For we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be done away with,[1] that we should no longer be slaves to sin--7because anyone who has died has been freed from sin."

Now, there's a lot we could unpack in these few verses, but for our purposes this morning Paul says here that when we are included in Christ (repent and believe), His death is applied to us in such away that when He died on the cross, our old self, our sinful nature, was crucified with Him. The result is that we have now died to sin and are no longer defined by that old man who is marked by the things we discussed last week --- hostility toward God and others. So to go on living in sin, is entirely contrary to the new reality of spiritual life that has taken place within us.

Q: And what is the result of the death of our old man?

A: We've been freed from our sin. (vs. 7)

So whereas in our former lives, we were dead to God, now we are alive to God and are dead to sin. Sin is, therefore, no longer our master like it once was. Essentially, there is a new master in our House, the Holy Spirit who indwells us and seals until the day of redemption (Eph. 2:14).

Q: Now, do you think Paul is saying here that we never struggle w/ and commit sin, anymore?

A: No, In fact in Romans 7, Paul writes openly about his own struggle with sin and the war between his spirit and his flesh, or between his old nature of sin and his new nature in Christ.

And in the Romans passage we just looked at, notice that Paul asks, **"How can we live in sin?" and not "How can we commit sin?"**

Here Paul conveys the truth that as Christians, we have died to sin in that it no longer reigns in our hearts and controls us as it once did. So, while we may commit sin and struggle with various temptations, we don't live in sin like we once did, without Godly conviction or remorse, without bearing spiritual fruit.

Which leads to the last aspect of our new life we'll mention today...

We are in a spiritual battle

Despite the fact that when we become Christians, the orientation of our lives changes toward God, and we are made dead to sin, there is a tension between what we are positionally in Christ -- dead to sin and alive to God --- and the continued presence of our flesh that is still tempted by sin. This is what you might call the "already but not yet" of our sanctification. We are already

dead to sin and alive to God in Christ, which enables us to recognize and overcome our sin, but we are not yet fully or completely sanctified, which means sin still has a presence in our lives.

So, now there is a conflict within us between the flesh and the Spirit. Paul captures this conflict in Galatians 5:17-18: “For the sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature. They are in conflict with each other, so that you do not do what you want.” Whereas before our conversion, we were slaves to sin, now we recognize sin for what it is and with God’s help do battle with it.

John Piper has a great way of capturing this tension or conflict: ***“When Paul says the flesh has been crucified, [he means] that the decisive battle has been fought and won by the Spirit. The Spirit has captured the capital and broken the back of the resistance movement. The flesh is as good as dead. Its doom is sure. But there are outlying pockets of resistance. The guerrillas of the flesh will not lay down their arms and must be fought back daily.***

So, the war has been won. If we are in Christ we are already dead to sin and alive with Christ, but there are still battles we must fight. Every exhortation for Christians to put sin away from them, then is a call for us to increasingly become in practice what we are already are positionally in Christ.

IV. Living By God’s Ways...Our Call to Action

We mentioned earlier that when we are converted, our nature is changed so that our mindset, or our affections and desires, becomes oriented to the things of God. We can see and understand what we could not see and understand prior to God’s work of salvation in our lives. We’ve also noted that ultimately it is God who enables to live according to His ways and to follow Him, and that it is God who completes the work of salvation from beginning to end. However, our Christian life is not meant to be a spectator sport. Rather we are called to action.

I love how Paul puts in Philippians 3:12, “I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus has taken hold of me!” Paul knows that it’s God who transforms him, yet that doesn’t lead him to passivity in his Christian walk, but rather to action, to take hold of the life for which Christ took hold of Him.

This two-fold way of thinking about our Christian life is everywhere found in Scripture. This morning we’re going to take look at three basic things Scripture calls us to do as Christians as we seek to live a life that pleases God.

Turn with me to Colossians 3:1-14. Would someone read verses 3:1

Set Your Mind on Things Above Colossians 3:1-4

In verse 1, Paul gives a general exhortation to set our hearts on things above, literally to seek after the things of God. But then he follows with three more specific exhortations, which form part of the basis of this morning’s outline.

I think it's interesting that the first exhortation following the general call to seek after God deals with our mindset. In verse two, Paul tells us to set our minds on the things above and not on earthly things. In other words, if we are going to live a life that glorifies God, one that seeks Him and His will, we must cultivate a heavenly, or a Godly, mindset.

So it's not enough for us to simply assume that God has given us a new nature and, along with it, a new mindset, so we can sit back and watch the Spirit move. Nowhere in Scripture are we told to "let go and let God," in the sense of passive, detached inactivity in our Christian life. Rather, we must be proactive in turning our minds from unspiritual ways of thinking and desiring things that feed our sinful nature, towards thinking about and desiring the things of God.

In Ephesians 3, Paul refers to this as renewing our minds. When we repent and believe, we once and for all are given a new nature and mindset, but we must continually renew our minds, which are still prone to fall into old patterns of thinking and desiring.

Q: How do we set our mind on things above?

A: There are many things we could say here, but I'll say two:

First, we should heed the advice of Philippians 4:8, which says, "**8Finally, brothers, 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.**

Often, the best cure for negative, sinful thinking is positive, spiritual thinking. In other words, meditating on God's word, what He has revealed about Himself and His plan, us, and the life we are called to live.

Secondly, we should heed the advice of Philippians 4:9, which says, "**9Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me--put it into practice.**" So, we should be obedient to what the Word of God says. We know that obedience is evidence that we are living by faith, trusting in God and hoping in an inheritance that will never fade. But we should also be mindful of the role that obedience plays in changing our desires. It's a reciprocating process: As we obey, we evidence genuine faith and yet, our faith is also strengthened, our hope and confidence in God becomes more sure.

And notice there in verse 3 that the basis for Paul's challenge to Christians is rooted in the truth that in Christ, they've died to sin and are hidden with Christ. Therefore, Paul is telling them to practically live in the reality of Christ. The idea is you are dead to sin, alive to Christ, so set your minds on things that reflect that reality

Let's move on...

Put to death things belonging to the Sinful Nature to Death Colossians 3:5-9

Q: In verse 5, what does Paul tell these Colossian Christians to do?

A: To put to death whatever belongs to their sinful nature

So, first Paul positively exhorts Christians to set their minds on things above, to cultivate a spiritual disposition. Secondly, he gives a negative exhortation to put death the flesh.

Remember that according to Romans 6, we are already dead to sin and have crucified our old nature to the cross with Christ, yet Paul exhorts Christians to continue putting to death those attitudes and actions that belong to their sinful nature. Again, we are to continue becoming practically what we already are positionally in Christ: Holy and blameless. So, the more the sin is purged from us, the more we become like Christ.

And notice the comprehensiveness of the exhortation. Paul says to put to death whatever belongs to the sinful nature. We aren't suppose to make categories of sins and rank them by permissible and impermissible. Any remnant in our lives that is not from the Spirit is inconsistent with our new nature and to who we are in Christ. And, it all must go.

Q: All this begs the question: What does it mean to put to death whatever belongs to our sinful nature?

A: I want to highlight two things that it means:

First, it means to be aware of sinful attitudes and actions in your life that are inconsistent with who we are Christ, which the Holy Spirit through our consciences and the Word makes known to us. So, the first stage in putting to death things of the sinful nature is to identify those patterns of thinking and those unspiritual desires that wage war against and conflict with holiness.

A good way to do this is to look at passages like Colossians 3 and Galatians 5, which highlight attitudes and actions of the flesh and examine your life by them. Which of these things do you still see hints of a presence in your life?

Secondly, it means to be proactively seeking deliverance from those things that you've identified. So, after you've done your ID work, the best thing you can do is pray to God for deliverance from them, because it's only through Him that you'll overcome sin. But as you do that, also do what John Stott says and starve the old man, or flesh.

Q: What do you think it means to starve the flesh?

A: The way you feed the sinful nature that still wages war against your new nature, is to give into sin. The only problem is that the more you feed the flesh, the hungrier it gets, so that you never satisfy the desire sin produces. On the other hand, the way to starve the sinful nature is to deprive it of what it desires, namely sin. And that's the essence of what Paul exhorts us to do.

Put to death those attitudes, desires, actions that feed the old man.

I think one final thing to note about this putting to death of things that belong to the sinful nature is that, given our susceptibility to fall back into old sinful patterns, it is necessarily a daily or continuous activity. This statement merely echoes what Jesus says in Luke 9:23, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me."

So, we must renew every day an attitude toward sin of ruthless and uncompromising rejection. On this very topic John Stott writes,

"If besetting sins consistently plague us, it is either because we have never truly repented, or because, having repented, we have not maintained our repentance. It is as if, having nailed our old nature to the cross, we keep

wistfully returning to the scene of its execution. We begin to fondle it, to caress it, to long for its release, even to try to take it down again from the cross. We need to learn to leave it there. When some jealous, or proud, or malicious, or impure thought invades our mind we must kick it out at once. It is fatal to begin to examine it and consider whether we are going to give in to it or not. We have declared war on it; we are not going to resume negotiations.

We have settled the issue for good; we are not going to re-open it. We have crucified the flesh; we are never going to draw the nails. (Stott, BST Commentary on Galatians, pg. 152)

So, putting to death things belonging to our sinful nature means following Christ to the cross. In a sense, we are to behave like a condemned criminal and take up our cross to the place of execution. And there we are to make sure, with God's help that the execution of takes place. That, metaphorically speaking, our willful and wayward self is nailed to the cross.

Finally, let's read verses 12-14

Clothe Yourself with Christian Virtues Colossians 3:12:14

So far, Paul challenges Christians to cultivate a spiritual mindset or disposition, to put to death all things produced by the sinful nature. Finally, in verse 12-15, Paul gives us another challenge.

Again, notice that we are called to action: To clothe ourselves, literally to dress our selves with the fruits of the Spirit.

Now, we could spend much time on each of these different fruits of the Spirit, each of which stand in stark contrast to the works of the flesh or sinful nature described in verses 5-9. But there's one that Paul gives prominence to above all the rest.

Q: Which fruit here is the most superior and why is it superior?

A: Love, because it binds all the other virtues together in perfect unity.

Essentially, Paul says that love is the principle or the source from which all these other virtues flow. If you think about it, without love, these other virtues would be hollow and empty. John Gill writes: "Without this (love) all (meaning the other virtues mentioned) is nothing; they will only be done in show and appearance, in mere guise and hypocrisy, if love is wanting; it is only from this principle that true sympathy, real kindness, undisguised humility, and meekness, patient longsuffering, and forbearance, and hearty forgiveness proceeds."

So, as Christians, the one indispensable piece of clothing we must put on is love, if we are to genuinely clothe ourselves with any of these other virtues.

Q: But, again, how do we take an exhortation as abstract as, "clothe yourselves with love," or any of the other virtues and make sense of it?

A: Again, there are many things we could say here, but there are two fundamental things to do: First, meditate often on the fact that the virtues with which we are to clothe ourselves are all virtues God exhibits toward us in salvation: God's compassion on us and kindness toward us are evident in Him saving us when we were so helpless and at war with Him. Philippians 2 is

just a great passage underscoring the humility of Christ as He condescended to take on flesh and die. Gentleness and patience were evident in God's redeeming action towards us and are still evident as we imperfectly follow Him.

So, essentially, meditate on the Gospel and what it means to be loved by God. Because all these things are the outworking of God's love for us in Christ Jesus.

God's own lovingkindness, as it says in Titus 3, is at the heart of God saving us. Paul writes in Galatians 2:20, "I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me." Love, Paul understood, was the great foundation of the gospel.

Secondly, as you understand more of how God's love has been applied to you, apply that same love to the situations and relationships that you encounter every day. This is essentially the conclusion John leads us to.

In I John 3:16, he writes, "This is love: Christ laid down His life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers." The basis of our own ability to love others is what Christ has done for us. So, to clothe ourselves with love, and subsequently, these other virtues, is to clothe ourselves with the Gospel.

And just one final point, last week we talked about the ground of our objective assurance: meaning God's work on our behalf before the foundation of the world. But, our subjective assurance is strengthened as we see the fruit of the Spirit operating in our lives. And in particular, John says, our ability to love other Christians as Christ has loved us gives us great confidence in our salvation. I John 3:14, "We know we have passed from death to life, if we love our brothers [other Christians]."

V. Conclusion

There are many things we could say about the theme of Living by God's Ways, but I hope that, at the very least, we recognize that it is God who enables us to live a life that pleases Him, but also that we as Christians are called to pursue Godliness, and that we can do so by:

- Cultivating a Godly mindset.
- Putting to death all that belongs to our sinful nature,
- Clothing ourselves with Christian virtues, in particular love.

For Further Reading: JI Packer, *Keep in Step with the Spirit*; JC Ryle, *Holiness*

Prayer - Next week – Listening to God