

## Christ and Your Character

In this lesson we shall consider the connection between our relationship with Jesus Christ, and our character. This subject addresses our heart character, which fuels our thoughts, which then enables our behaviour. God intends our knowledge of Christ to achieve more than good doctrine and good Sunday behaviour. A genuine understanding of Christ must produce Christlike character. For a believer, Christ's character is to dominate our heart, our mind, our speech, and our behaviour, until we can say with Paul, *"to live is Christ"* (Philippians 1:21).

This lesson builds upon lesson 11, *Applied Theology*, and seeks to extend our understanding of Bible application in the areas of heart, thought, and behaviour. Yahweh is interested in far more than superficial good behaviour, He wants the heart, for *"everything you do flows from it"* (Proverbs 4:23 NIV). Whatever, or whoever, controls the heart, controls the whole life, and that needs to be Christ.

Ezekiel prophesied much about the day when the Lord will restore Israel. When that time arrives, the Lord will deal with Israel's heart. Ezekiel 36:26, *"I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will*

*remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh.*" In that coming day, all living Israel shall be regenerated, born-again, and indwelt by the Holy Spirit.

Only the Lord can do this supernatural work of removing a sinfully hard heart, and replace it with a soft, submissive heart that is compelled by love for Yahweh. You see, the Lord desires for our righteous behaviour to be an accurate outworking of a soft and righteous heart. This requires a new soft heart, and a renewed mind to produce Christlike character. There are no short-cuts, and there is no cheating or pretending in this Christ compelled inner work.

Paul's writes to the Church in Rome, explaining in just a few verses what we are considering here. "*Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.* <sup>2</sup> *Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God.* <sup>3</sup> *Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance,* <sup>4</sup> *and endurance produces character, and character produces hope,* <sup>5</sup> *and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts*

*through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us”* (Romans 5:1-5).

Paul presents the foundation of our Christian relationship with God and how the Spirit of God works within us. These essential truths give us an understanding of what it means to glorify God through our character. Plus, these verses show us the qualities of a truly born-again Christian. Here, Paul presents us with the most basic fruits of salvation that should be evident in a believer’s life.

Christian character grows out of salvation. Without faith in Jesus Christ as our substitute on the Cross of Calvary, there is no justification. No faith equals no forgiveness of sin. If we are not forgiven by God, we are still dead in our sins, weighted down under the wrath of God. *Justification by faith* is the only way any sinner can be declared innocent before God who is Judge.

We deceive ourselves if we do not stand firm on the truth of the gospel in this area of character development. Many church attendees fail to manifest Christlike character because they have never placed faith in Christ as Saviour and Lord. In other words, because of their lack of faith they are not justified before God. Consequently, they attend

church with hard and deceived hearts, unable to see their own sin or “*the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God*” (2 Corinthians 4:4). Satan blinds their minds so that they are unable to see the beauty of Christ in the gospel. They are often perplexed and saddened by worshippers who stand in awe of God’s majesty displayed through Christ on the Cross and in the gospel.

God is not looking for church attenders! God does not want us to convince unchurched people to become church people. God is not trying to convince sinful societies to behave better so that they can feel better about themselves and have less problems. God is not trying to improve people so that they will find the gospel attractive. God does not want sinners attempting to work their way into Church life by their good works. God is not seeking religious people who become skilful at spiritual deception and manipulation.

No, God’s message to mankind is to “*repent therefore, and turn back, that your sins may be blotted out,* <sup>20</sup> *that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord*” (Acts 3:19-20). This gospel message is humanity’s only hope. God calls them to “*confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the*

*dead, and you will be saved.*<sup>10</sup> *For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved*" (Romans 10:9-10). Having placed repentant faith in Christ, the believer now realises that they stand cleansed and secure in God's grace. They now rejoice in their new position of innocence before God, washed clean by the blood of Christ (1Jn 1:7). They now look to the future with certain hope of heaven and the call of glorifying God through their living (1Co 10:31). Paul defines this spiritual change by saying that "*if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come*" (2 Corinthians 5:17). Faith in Christ changes the entire life, it's unmistakable.

This new life, which has been gifted to them, produces rejoicing even while suffering. In Christ, they see that suffering can accomplish more than they ever imagined, but only if they maintain a humble and submissive attitude. Paul continues to say that suffering for Christ "*produces endurance,<sup>4</sup> and endurance produces character, and character produces hope*" (Rom 5:3-4). Suffering is for the purpose of character development, which is evidence of God's love existing in their hearts by the Holy Spirit.

Once reborn and indwelt by God's loving Holy Spirit, He empowers the suffering believer to grow *endurance, character, and hope* which brings God glory. These inner qualities of grace take the believer towards maturity in Christ. The Christian lives for God and NOT for self. They do not live for greedy or selfish pleasures. Personal convenience and comfort are secondary to them. They live for Christ! "*For if we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord. So then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's*" (Romans 14:8). This is why Paul could honestly say, "*for to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain*" (Philippians 1:21).

This highlights our need to preach the Lordship of Christ when we proclaim the gospel. We are not trying to convince people to add Jesus to their existing beliefs. Nor do we tell them to place Jesus to one side where He has no place of authority in their lives. Rather, we are to "*put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its* (sinful) *desires*" (Romans 13:14).

Paul shows us God's perspective on our salvation in Romans 8:29; "*for those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son.*" Simply believing

about Christ has never been God's plan. God the Father exercised His will (Jn 6:37, 44, 65) for the purpose of bringing people into a relationship of conformity to the image of Christ. The Father's will in salvation is to reproduce Christ's character in every believer. This requires humble submission on the part of the repentant sinner.

Sinners do NOT come to Christ to find themselves or to improve themselves. No, they come to Christ to lose themselves and put on Christ. Paul explains it this way, "*for as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ*" (Galatians 3:27). In context, the baptism Paul speaks of here is dry, no water. This is the baptism by God's Spirit into Christ through justification by faith.

Christlike character growing in the believer is the persistent ministry of the Holy Spirit following salvation. 2 Corinthians 3:18 says, "*we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.*" Just as Christlikeness was the Father's will in salvation, so Christlikeness is the Holy Spirit's will through sanctification. We are NOT set apart for holiness so that we can be the better version of who we

are. No, we are set apart for holiness to be like Christ. We are to be imitators of the Lord Jesus Christ (1Th 1:6) who is the very best from God.

Jesus taught this principle in Luke 6:40, *"a disciple is not above his teacher, but everyone when he is fully trained will be like his teacher."* When we call people to come follow Jesus, we are calling them to surrender their all so that they can increasingly become like Jesus through spiritual rebirth and sanctification. This is the opposite of how the religious person thinks. Religion says, if you do good works and become more like Jesus, you may be able to win God's favour and go to heaven – **WRONG!**

Jesus, *"calling the crowd to him with his disciples, he said to them, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me."* <sup>35</sup> *For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it"* (Mark 8:34-35). Self must be denied if a person is to be saved through the gospel of Jesus Christ. If self-denial is the attitude of a repentant sinner at the time of salvation, then it should continue for life.

Repentant sinners need to realise that through salvation Christ is going to change them. When confronted by the chief priests and elders in Matthew 21:32, Jesus addressed their unwillingness to change. Jesus said, “*for John came to you in the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him.* *And even when you saw it, you did not afterward change your minds and believe him.*” Change of belief and behaviour towards Jesus Christ is God’s normal, and it is good. Personal change should be expected, it should be preached, and it should be included in all discipleship.

The apostle Paul serves as an example through his willingness to change in practical ways. He told the Galatian church, “*I wish I could be present with you now and change my tone, for I am perplexed about you*” (Galatians 4:20). Many believers fail in the simple sanctification of attitude and speech towards others. The tone of our voice always expresses the attitude of our heart. Paul realised that if he were with the Galatians in person, he would change the way he was speaking to them. This is because, as he was writing to them from a long distance, he was perplexed about them and struggling to understand what was happening in their lives.

To grow in Christlike character, we submit ourselves to the changing ministry of the Holy Spirit. This is a never ending ministry of sanctification, making us more holy, and more like Christ. Therefore, ongoing change is the inescapable path of sanctification as "*he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ*" (Philippians 1:6). The rapture will bring this earthly process to completion when "*we shall all be changed,<sup>52</sup> in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed.*" (1 Corinthians 15:51-52).

In Romans 12, Paul instructed the Roman Church on the relationship between having physically pure lives and worship. "*Present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship*" (Romans 12:1). He immediately follows with an instruction which goes much deeper than physical holiness; "*be transformed by the renewal of your mind...*" (Romans 12:2). Growing in Christlike character impacts our bodies and our minds. This is God's will for every believer in Christ.

Believers are to praise God for the privilege of being called into a life of growing sanctification towards greater Christlikeness. “*We are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ*” (Ephesians 4:15). Notice that Paul says the growth should always be upwards towards greater Christlikeness. Going backwards, or even standing still is not God’s will for us. Notice also, that this growth is to be “*in every way.*” No area of life goes untouched. No part of our lives, including our characters, can escape this all important work of God the Holy Spirit. To grow more and more into Christlike character is our earthly act of worship! This we need to understand, and this we need to be committed to as we proclaim the gospel and disciple people to be followers of Christ as Lord and Saviour.

Our sanctification is never challenged more than in our relationships with others, especially our brothers and sisters in the Lord. “*In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus*” (Philippians 2:5 NIV). While it’s true that in 1 Corinthians 2:16 Paul tells us that “*we have the mind of Christ,*” we are responsible to action Christ’s mind. We are the ones who must choose to put personal preferences and feelings to one side, permitting

the mind of Christ to dominate our character towards others.

We do this because, in Christ, we have been equipped by the Holy Spirit to change. He energises us to be like Christ, to be different from our old nature. Now, in Christ, believers are able, if they submit, to “*do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves*” (Philippians 2:3).

Only in Christ are believers empowered by the Holy Spirit to “*look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others*” (Philippians 2:4). Therefore, our attitude towards others is a good thermometer of the level of Christlike character which you have permitted the Holy Spirit to achieve in you. Relationships with others can tell a powerful story of our submission to the Lordship of Jesus. Sadly, the opposite is also true. Our relationships can tell of the sadness of a belligerent believer who resists change, and resists Christlikeness. May this never be true in us?

Jesus commanded “*that you love one another as I have loved you.*”<sup>13</sup> *Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends*” (John 15:12-13).

This deep love for others does not just happen overnight. No, it takes time as the child of God grows in Christlike love, in self-sacrificing love. It begins with changing attitudes towards others. Then, it develops Christlike motives as the reason for serving others without expectation of reward. This love exists *"because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us"* (Romans 5:5).

May we meditate on God's Word and think often of Jesus Christ. As we think of Christ may our hearts become more and more soft to the controlling of God's Holy Spirit. And as our hearts soften, may we pray more often, with greater passion, with greater urgency, seeking greater glory for Christ. May God continue to transform our hearts to be completely like Christ. Remember, *"above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it"* (Proverbs 4:23 NIV).

The final word in this lesson shall go to the apostle Paul from Philippians 3:7-11. *"But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all*

*things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ<sup>9</sup> and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith - <sup>10</sup> that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, <sup>11</sup> that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead."*