

UNDERSTANDING CHRISTIANITY

Part 24 – Living as a Christian

Key Questions:

- What is different about living as a Christian? How should Christians think and act?

Looking back and forward – salvation past, present and future

The Christian life is lived between two great events – the death of Jesus Christ, and the future day when He will come again to judge all people. Christians look back to Jesus' first coming to earth and forward to His second coming. God has made a way through Jesus for us to be saved from our sin. This salvation is real in the past, present and future:

PAST – God has forgiven our sins, and has brought us into a new relationship with Him. He is our Father, and He has given us the free gift of eternal life through Jesus. We receive this gift of forgiveness and eternal life when we repent (turn away from our sin) and trust in God to save us and lead us from now on. Paul wrote in Ephesians 2:8-10:

God saved you by his special favour when you believed. And you can't take credit for this; it is a gift from God. Salvation is not a reward for the good things we have done, so none of us can boast about it.

PRESENT – God constantly helps us to live our lives for Him day by day. He saves us from the power of sin through the Holy Spirit who lives in us. The Holy Spirit's goal is to make us more like Christ day by day (see below).

FUTURE – On the day of resurrection, when Christ returns, we will finally be saved from the presence of sin. In the new Universe there will be no sin. At the last judgement we will also be saved from God's anger. This is because of Jesus, who died to take the punishment for our sins, and who is alive now to keep us safe. Simon Peter could, therefore, write about the "coming salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time" (1 Peter 1:5).

So, every Christian looks back not only to the death of Jesus Christ in 33 AD, but also to their own conversion (the time when they first placed their faith in Christ), and they also look forward to the day when Jesus will come again because on that day we know that we will see Jesus as He is and become like Him (1 John 3:1-3). This hope gives great strength to Christians to keep living for God even when things are difficult or when they face opposition.

The struggle with sin and the fruit of the Spirit

The Christian life is about being saved from the power of sin in our lives so that we can do what pleases God – **our ultimate goal is to become like Christ**. Christians can still sin, since we still have the sinful nature we inherited from Adam, but we also have the Holy Spirit living in us. Because of sin we have fallen short of God's standard of perfection (Romans 3:23). When Jesus returns we will be made perfect, reaching God's standard (1 John 3:3). In the meantime, the Holy Spirit is working in us so that we "*become more and more like Him and reflect His glory more and more*" (11 Corinthians 3:18). The Holy Spirit changes our minds and hearts so that we think and feel as God does, but He never forces us to change – He only does this as we surrender our will to Him. The sinful nature in us still wants to do wrong, but the Spirit wants to produce a character in our lives that is just like Jesus. Paul talks about this struggle in **Galatians 5:16-26**. He tells Christians to "*follow the Holy Spirit's leading in every part of our lives*" (verse 25). In **Ephesians 5:18** he tells us to "*let the Holy Spirit fill and control you*". Every day a Christian must decide to allow the Holy Spirit to shape our minds and hearts – we can ask Him every day to give us the power to do what is right and to resist the temptation to do what is wrong. The results of the Holy Spirit's work in a person's life are often called His "fruit". The first quality in the list in Galatians 5:22-23 is love, which is the greatest proof of God's work in a person's life. Christian love cares for other people (even those who are different from us) in the sacrificial way that God has loved us (by sending Jesus to die for us).

A daily relationship with God

Christianity is not just a religion but a relationship with God. As Christians we do not live each day by following a set of rules, but by getting to know God better. There are a number of ways that we can grow in our relationship with Him:

Prayer – talking to God

The most famous prayer in the Bible is often known as the Lord's Prayer because it was taught by Jesus to His disciples. It is found in **Matthew 6:9-13**. Jesus teaches His followers to pray to God as Father, showing the close relationship that we can have with Him through Jesus. The prayer contains six requests:

1. "*May your name be honoured*" – Christians always want God to be honoured in their lives – He is the King!
2. "*May your Kingdom come soon*" – we look forward to the time when Jesus returns to restore the Kingdom.
3. "*May your will be done here on earth, just as it is in heaven.*" – we also pray that God's will be done in our lives and that we can be part of bringing about what God wants to happen on earth.
4. "*Give us our food for today*" – we ask God to provide those things that we need.
5. "*and forgive us our sins, just as we have forgiven those who have sinned against us*" – we confess our sins, keeping open before God, and remember to forgive others, keeping good relationships with them.
6. "*And don't let us yield to temptation, but deliver us from the evil one*" – we pray for God to help us to do what is right and to resist the temptation to sin

There are no right and wrong words to use as we pray – the important thing is that our attitude is right before God – that we are trusting Him and seeking to give Him the honour. Many Christians end their prayers by saying:

- **In Jesus' name** – this means that they are praying in Jesus' authority, not because they think they are important
- **Amen** – this word means "I agree" or "let this happen" and is often said by other Christians after one person prays

In prayer it can be helpful to think of four different aspects of our relationship with God:

- **Adoring God** – simply thinking about God and praising Him by telling Him how great He is
- **Confessing our sins** – admitting our sins to God in the same way that a little child would confess to his father
- **Thanking God** – thanking God for everything He has given us
- **Requests** – asking God to give us those things that we feel we need and for people we love and those in positions of authority in society. However, our prayers are always for God's will to be done, not what we think is best.

Bible reading – listening to God

Christians believe that the Bible is God's word spoken to us. Because of this, every part of the Bible is useful for us to learn how to live our lives. Paul wrote about this in II Timothy 3:16-17. He said that the Bible can make God's people ready to do His good work because it does four things in our lives:

1. *It teaches us what is true*
2. *It straightens us out* (brings us from wrong to right)
3. *It makes us realise what is wrong in our lives*
4. *It teaches us how to keep on doing what is right*

Christians place a very high value on the Bible, and they make it part of their lives in several ways:

1. **Reading it** – many Christians read the Bible each day, asking God to speak to them through it
2. **Studying it** – we spend time trying to understand accurately what it says, both alone and in groups
3. **Meditating on it** – spending time thinking over God's word, applying its truth to our lives.

Many Christians also memorise parts of the Bible to help them to live it out. To understand the Bible it is important to ask the Holy Spirit to help you, to read each verse in the context of the book it is in, and against the background of the message of the whole Bible, and to ask other Christians for help when you find it difficult. Christians can often tell many stories about how God has spoken clearly to them through the Bible.

Disciplines to make time for God

Many Christians make use of other disciplines that help them to make time for God, including spending time alone, spending time in silence, fasting (abstaining from food for a period of time) and writing a journal of their thoughts. However, it is important to remember that we do these things to know God more, not to try to please Him. He already loves us fully, and we must never forget that our salvation and acceptance by Him is completely because of grace, not because we have earned it. We can think about this in terms of a marriage relationship – we do things for our wife or husband because we love them, and we make time to be with them because we want to know them more, not because the vows we made to them force us to. God's grace is freely shown to us; all we have to do is receive it through faith.

Priorities and decision-making

The greatest priority for every Christian should be to bring glory to God by his own actions and by helping other people to know Him. **Our first priority should be to seek God's Kingdom**, and everything else should follow after this (Matthew 6:33). We are God's children and everything we have is a loving gift from our Father (our abilities and our possessions), so we must use them wisely for Him. This principle will apply in every aspect of our lives including:

1. **Church Life** – every Christian should be a committed member of a local church (see *Part 21*), and should discover what abilities and spiritual gifts God has given him to help other Christians to grow spiritually.
2. **Family Life** – Christians have a very high view of marriage and family life. We must respect and care for our parents, and we must bring up our children in a way that helps them to know God. If we are married we should love our husband or wife the way God loved us, and always be faithful to them (see Ephesians 5:22-6:4).
3. **Working life** – a Christian should be hard-working and respectful and should always be honest. We are citizens of God's kingdom first, and must work for Him first (see *Part 22* – the relationship of church to State). We should be generous with our money and possessions, and not greedy to have more money (I Timothy 6:6-10, 17-19).

So, being a good Christian should make us a better citizen and worker, husband or wife, parent or child etc. Our new goal in life is to become more like Jesus and to see God's Kingdom come in every part of our lives.

How do Christians make decisions about what to do in life and what choices to make? There are several tests:

- **God's Word** (Psalm 119:105) – if the Bible says something is wrong, it is wrong. God will not ask us to do anything that He has already told us we must not do.
- **God's honour** – does the thing we are thinking of doing help us to honour God? Will it help us to be more like Jesus (could we imagine Him doing it?). It is always good to ask questions about our motivation for doing things. If our reason is purely selfish it is probably not a good idea.
- **Your purity** – anything that makes it more difficult for you to be like Christ is probably bad for you. This is a good test when asking whether a particular movie, song or website is suitable for you to watch or listen to.
- **Your gifting** – has God given you the ability to do this thing or is this not really your area of gifting?
- **Prayer** – when you pray about this decision do you feel more at peace or more uneasy about it? It is very often when you pray that the Holy Spirit leads you by giving you a desire for what God wants (Galatians 5:25).
- **Wise advice** (Proverbs 20:18) – it is always a good idea to get advice from wise, older Christians who know you well and know God well. They may see problems with your plans that you have not seen, or even something in your character that is not good that you might have missed.
- **Circumstances** – if God wants you to do something for Him, He will make it possible for you at the right time. He always knows the best time, and sometimes you need to wait for His timing.

Key Lesson: The Christian life is a daily relationship with God seeking His Kingdom first

Christians are God's children, and the Christian life is about a relationship with Him which grows over time as we pray and read God's Word. As Christians we seek to do God's will and to see His Kingdom come in our lives and through our lives in the world. Our relationship with Him shapes how we think about everything else.