

Chapter One

A New Basis for Living

Luke 6:12-49

Before we can enter in this section of Luke's narrative, we must make certain we are clear that Jesus is setting before us not a new set of rules whereby one may gain heaven after death; *but a new reality out from which to live the new life of the Spirit, in the present day*. Life in the kingdom of God is a present-day reality, inaugurated by Jesus, and realized in the gift of the indwelling Spirit. And "inaugurated" means the kingdom of God is yet to be fully realized, though it is no less real, and available today. This new reality is defined by true life and abiding peace for those who walk in the Spirit, even in the midst of tribulations. This being the case, why then is it most Christian are not experiencing this new reality of the kingdom of God; meaning, why is it most professing Christians do not experience genuine transformation into Christlikeness, and the life and peace that accompanies such transformation?

Obstacles to New Life in Christ

For many of us, life has been a harsh reality. Many of us have suffered spiritually, emotionally, physically, financially, relationally. And even though we are now in Christ, the world, at times, still seems dark and foreboding. Some of us struggle with unresolved trauma, and the subsequent chains of codependence and addiction. We would like a new basis for living—a new reality. But there are obstacles to embracing the new reality, chief among which is not what one would think, meaning, the chief obstacle to experiencing new life in Christ is not sin—God has dealt with sin; rather, the chief obstacle to new life is a prevailing theology that does not associate transformation with salvation.

And we live at a time in which the term *discipleship* has been divorced from what it means to be a Christian, and the *kingdom of God* has been divorced from our understanding of the gospel. Consequently, most professing Christians have been oriented to think of forgiveness and salvation as going to heaven when they die, with little or no expectation for transformation of life in the now.

For instance, here are the common "gospels" by which most people respond to Christianity.

- 1) Jesus died for your sins, and if you believe that, you will go to heaven when you die. You must make a decision for Christ to have assurance.
- 2) Jesus came to free the oppressed, and you can stand with Him in that battle. Political and social activism are the means for bringing liberation.

- 3) Jesus founded the Church and wants you to obey the ordained leaders and its sacramental system to ensure you go to heaven.¹

Now, each of these “gospels” bear some essential truth, but they are incomplete. They do not represent what Paul referred to as “the whole counsel of God” (Acts 20:27). Now this is important to you because the gospel is designed to save the *whole person*, that is to say, the gospel is designed to make you whole, and a partial gospel simply cannot do that. A partial gospel may get you in the door, but has nothing to offer afterward. And those who preach a partial gospel simply have no answers for you when life becomes hard and painful. The result is people “get saved,” but have little or no instruction as to how to live in the present—they are not taught how to be disciples. For most evangelical churches, the “Great Commission” has become the “Great Omission.”

The Great Omission

Let’s look at what is come to be called the Great Commission.

¹⁶ Then the eleven disciples went away into Galilee, to the mountain which Jesus had appointed for them. ¹⁷ When they saw Him, they worshiped Him; but some doubted. ¹⁸ And Jesus came and spoke to them, saying, “All **authority** has been given **to Me** in heaven **and on earth**. ¹⁹ Go therefore and **make disciples** of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ **teaching** them to **observe all things** that I have commanded you; and lo, I am **with you** always, *even* to the end of the age.” Amen (Matthew 28:16-20, NKJV).

Most Christians know Jesus is in charge in heaven, but they do not experience His authority here “on earth.” And most Christian evangelism is focused on producing converts, not disciples. There is therefore little or no teaching about the implications of worshipping a triune God, nor is there any genuine expectation of teaching how to observe the authority and commands of Jesus in daily life. And here is the astonishing thing: these are the conditions upon which Jesus said He would be with the church! The reverse implication is clear: *the absence of these things evidence Jesus is not with a church*. “It is true that Jesus said ‘Without me you can do nothing,’ but if you do nothing, it will most certainly be without Him.”²

In other words, if a church is not making disciples and teaching them about what it means to be a trinitarian community. And if a church is not teaching believers how to think and live under the authority of the Master, Jesus, then Jesus is not to be found there, no matter how “Christian” that church may claim to be. Christianity is nothing if not a new basis for living. But moving into life in the Spirit has always been accompanied by temptations. Many of the

¹ See Dallas Willard, “The Human Side of Holiness”. Lecture one. Available on-line at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Cg3kOd5l6Co> [retrieved 05/03/19]

² Dallas Willard, “Spiritual Formation as a Natural Part of Salvation,” online lecture.

churches formed during the apostolic era made a good beginning, but then became distracted from the mission of making disciples into other things; some left their first love; others became corrupt, lifeless, and lukewarm. The risen Christ warned these churches and called them to repentance (see Revelation 2-3). And this same warning and call to repentance applies to all churches, today.

So, the challenge before us is this: Are we going to be a church where Jesus is present, and disciples are made to the glory of God? If the answer is in the affirmative, then we must take seriously what it means to be disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ. Now, this commitment itself comes with dangers. And those dangers involve falling into perfectionism and legalism. So, I want to talk with you now about the basis for discipleship and transformation.

The Principle of Life in the Spirit

In this section of Luke's Gospel, Jesus is commanding His disciples to live out of a new reality—the kingdom of God. In the kingdom of God, the children of God *actively* reflect the character of their heavenly Father, just as Jesus did. Notice in 6:35-36:

³⁵ But love your enemies, do good, and lend, hoping for nothing in return; and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High. For He is kind to the unthankful and evil. ³⁶ Therefore be merciful, just as your Father also is merciful.

Up to this point in the Gospel of Luke, we have read of Jesus' active ministry of mercy; now Jesus is teaching His disciples to do as He does, that is to say, to reflect in their actions and lifestyle the character of the Father, and thus show themselves to be "sons of the Most High." This is also found in Matthew's parallel account:

Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven (Matthew 5:16).

And Peter also,

¹¹ Beloved, I beg *you* as sojourners and pilgrims, abstain from fleshly lusts which war against the soul, ¹² having your conduct honorable among the Gentiles, that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may, by *your* good works which they observe, glorify God in the day of visitation (I Peter 2:11-12).

And in the Gospel of John, Jesus told His disciples,

By this My Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit; so you will be My disciples (John 15:8).

The life of a disciple is lived out for the glory of God, and not the self. And this requires a reorientation of the mind and the will, but not by natural efforts; rather, it requires a formation of the human spirit by the Holy Spirit.³ This sermon of Jesus, therefore, is not a suggestion, nor is it merely a presentation of universal spiritual principles; rather, it is Jesus commanding a new way of thinking and living for His kingdom subjects. But here is where we need to be careful not to resort to operating under our own steam. For this new reality is grounded not in carnal effort, but in the *regulative principle* of the Spirit of life.

Now, I want to explain to you what is meant by “regulative principle of the Spirit of life.” If we do not grasp this, it will be very easy to fall into the old trap of perfectionism and legalism. Let’s turn to Paul’s letter to the Romans.

First, in chapter six, Paul reminds his readers that they were once “slaves of sin,” that is to say, the *regulative principle* at work in the old, sinful nature, was toward sin and death. He then tells them, as a result of their obeying “that form of doctrine to which you were delivered,” they have now become “slaves of righteousness,” meaning, the new regulative principle in their new nature in Christ is toward righteousness (Romans 6:1-18). These believers had been on the receiving end of the Great Commission; they had been taught to become disciples based in the new regulative principle of life now at work in them by the Spirit.

In Romans 7:7-25, Paul illustrates this further by portraying life under the law. Paul is not describing the Christian struggle with remaining sin; these verses are *not* about the Christian struggle with sin. Here Paul is describing what it is like to be a good, but unregenerate Jew living under the Mosaic Law. The “I” here may be autobiographical, but it does not apply to Paul as a Christian. The external, Mosaic Law is spiritual; “holy and just and good,” but he states there is another “law”⁴—an internal law—also at work within him that does not allow him to keep the Mosaic Law and enjoy the blessing thereof. He wants to, but his will is subject to another “law” in his body—this is the *regulative principle of sin* working in the unregenerate. The will responds to nature. This is the fallacy of placing too much confidence in free-will; the will *is* free only to do that which nature dictates. In the fallen nature, the *regulative principle* is sin and death. This is why mere external religion is useless in restraining the sinful impulses (Colossians 2:23). No one can simply buck up and stop sinning. Even popular Twelve-Step literature teaches the powerlessness of the will to stop whatever compulsive behavior afflicts a person.

Therefore, Paul, cries out, “O wretched man that I am!” He cannot save himself. The regulative principle of sin and death in the unregenerate nature cannot perform what the Mosaic Law required to be saved. “Who will save me from this body of death?” Who indeed? Not what, but who? “I thank God—through Jesus Christ our Lord!” He adds, “So then, with the

³ Dallas Willard, “Spiritual Formation as a Natural Part of Salvation,” in *Life in the Spirit*

⁴ The New American Standard helps here by capitalizing “Law” when referencing the Mosaic Law, and lower case, “law,” when referencing the regulative principle.

mind I myself serve the Law of God"—he recognizes it as holy, just, and good—"but with the flesh, the law of sin." The good news is, in Christ, God has acted to save us from this regulative principle of sin and death. Look to the next few verses, 8:1-2.

Here Paul declares that condemnation is no longer even a category for those in Christ Jesus. *God would no more condemn the one in Christ than He would condemn Christ Himself.* And why is this? Because the one in Christ believes all the right things? Isn't that what we have been taught? Believe all the right things and you are saved. No, it is because those in Christ Jesus no longer walk according to the *regulative principle* (law) of sin and death in the flesh, but in the *regulative principle* (law) of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus.

Those in Christ Jesus have been set free from the regulative principle of sin and death—we are no longer obligated to it. "Therefore, brethren, we are debtors—not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh. For if you live accordingly to the flesh you will die; but if by the Spirit you put death the deeds of the body, you will live" (Romans 8:12-13). How do we put to death the deeds of the body? Not by religious rites and rituals of harsh bodily treatment, but by walking in the Spirit (Galatians 5:16). Our obligation is to walk in the Spirit, in accord with the new regulative principle of life within us, and not to obey the demands of sin and death.

The only problem is we are far more familiar with the old regulative principle of sin and death, than we are the Spirit of life. No one has to tell us what it is like to sin. It even seems to remain more natural for us to sin, than not to sin, even though we are in Christ. But that is only because we need to renew our minds to act in accord to the new regulative principle of the Spirit of life. This requires discipline; spiritual disciplines. Growth in grace is all about renewing the mind, and therefore the behavior, to come into line with the Spirit of life.

Let me illustrate: when a child is told they are rotten, no good, and doomed to failure, the parent is "reckoning evil" to the child, and the child will live down to that expectation. On the other hand, a child who is told they are precious, and valuable, and deserve to be cared for, (including loving discipline for any behavior outside of that reckoned) the parent is reckoning good to the child, who will live up to it. Proverbs tells us, "Train a child in the way he should go, and when he is old, he will not depart from it" (Proverbs 22:6). Likewise, God reckons those in Christ to be righteous, holy, and good. He sees you as He sees His beloved Son, and we are freed now to live up to what God says about us. In other words, God reckons you to be something He has actually been created in you—a new creation—which bears fruit in actual righteousness (II Corinthians 5:17; Galatians 6:15). Actual, behavioral righteousness, begins with reckoning yourself as God reckons you; seeing yourself as God sees you, in Christ.

This is why worm theology is so destructive. Those who view Romans 7:7-25 as describing the Christian life—"I am carnal, sold under sin" (Romans 7:14); "For what I will to do I do not practice; but what I hate to do" (v.15), get stuck in "O wretched man that I am!" (v.24). In the end, they are in fact working against the renewing of the mind commanded later in Romans 12:2. Listen, there is only one time you should refer to yourself as a wretched person,

and that is before you are born again (regeneration) and not thereafter. “O wretched man that I am!” is not the Christian confession; that is the confession of one under Law, and whatever Paul was, he was not a man under the Law.⁵ Here then is what I want you take with you today,

The Christian life is that of a disciple working out the character of his or her Master into daily life, while serving as an ambassador for the kingdom of God.

So then, we can now approach this critical part of the Gospel narrative, not with dread in anticipation of moralism, perfectionism, or legalism, but rejoicing in our understanding that Jesus’ commands are directed toward the disciple in whom the regulative principle of life exists.

For the commands in Jesus’ sermon are given to those in whom the regulative principle of the Spirit of life is present and enabling an obedient response.⁶ It is like teaching a child to walk or talk—they will catch on and soon they become a person for whom walking and talking are the natural thing to do. And that is what God wants for you—to be so like His Son, that obedience is the natural thing to do. “This is the love of God, that we keep His commandments, and His commandments are not grievous” (1 John 5:3).

This, beloved of God, is the miracle of the new covenant. That God has given us, by His Spirit, a new nature, a new heart, whereby the regulative principle of life enables us to walk as true children of God, partakers in the divine nature, and bringing glory of the Father by our good works. **AMEN.**

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⁵ Gordon Fee, “Kingdom of God,” online lectures: lecture two.

⁶ I recognize that at this point in the Gospel narrative, the Holy Spirit had not yet been given, and it cannot be said that those listening were therefore regenerate people. But the Lord Jesus Himself was present, and He who would soon be in them, the Holy Spirit, was nonetheless with them. God was also at work drawing people to Christ.