

man went down to his house justified” (*Luke 18:13-14*). In order to stand before God we must be holy. Since we are all unholy in his sight, we must look outside of ourselves to Jesus alone who is holy and perfect. We will all stand before God’s judgment some day—either in our sins and be condemned, or clothed in the perfect righteousness of Christ (*2 Cor 5:21; Phil 3:9*).

We tend to think that God will accept us into his presence because of what we do. Perhaps we think that if our good deeds outweigh our bad deeds, he will accept us on Judgment Day. But it’s only what Jesus did that God accepts. God only accepts us if we are “in Christ.” We can only come to God through his Son. Have you ceased from your own works and rested your soul in the work of Christ? Are you trusting in Christ’s life, death, burial and resurrection alone for your salvation? May the Holy Spirit bring you to cry out, “God be merciful to me the sinner, through your Son Jesus Christ.”

Freedom in Christ

Paul exhorted Christians to “Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free, and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage” (*Gal 5:1*). During the times of the early church there were two basic threats to the freedom which Christ purchased for believers on the cross. The first was the teaching that believers had to keep the law of Moses in order to be saved (*Acts 15:2,5*). The other was that a spiritual person would keep various man-made rules, like abstaining from certain meats. The answer of the New Testament to both of these false teachings was found in the cross of Christ.

Jesus’ redemptive work fulfilled the law and thereby abolished it (*Eph 2:15; Col 2:14; Rom 3:21; Matt 5:17*). The Jews were designated as being “under law.” Nowhere in the New Testament are Christians said to be “under law.” Instead, believers are “in law to Christ” (*1 Cor 9:21*—“*ennomos Christou*”). The law came through Moses, but grace and truth came by Jesus Christ (*John 1:17*). The law had a specific beginning 430 years after the promise to Abraham, and this Mosaic era came to an end with the coming of Christ (*Gal 3:24-25*).

The law kept the Jews separate from the Gentiles. So in order for Christ to bring Jews and Gentiles into one body, the law had to be removed as a barrier. Christ did this in his work on the cross (*Eph 2:14-15*). He fulfilled perfectly all the requirements of the law, and then instituted a New Covenant which was put into effect by the shedding of his blood. Under the Old Covenant, Moses gave laws to Israel; under the New Covenant, Christ gave his commandments to his people on earth:

He that hath my commandments, and keepeth them, he it is that loveth me (*John 14:21*). For ye know what commandments we gave you by the Lord Jesus (*1 Thess 4:2*). Hereby we do know that we know him, if we keep his commandments. He that saith, I know him, and keepeth not his commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him (*1 John 2:3-4*—*these are the commandments of “Jesus Christ,” see vv 1 & 2*).

Believers, then, are not under the administration of Moses. They are under Christ’s headship. Christians are “led by the

Spirit” and are “under grace,” not “under law” (*Gal 5:18; Rom 6:14*). “Grace,” not “the law,” teaches the saints to pursue good works and to abstain from worldly lusts:

For the grace of God that bringeth salvation hath appeared to all men, teaching us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly, in this present world (*Titus 2:11-12*).

Believers are to give themselves to bearing the burdens of others, thus fulfilling “the law of Christ” to love one another (*Gal 6:2*). If they are distracted by false teachers to bear the yoke of the law of Moses, then they lose their joy and assume a burden that no one has ever been able to bear (*Acts 15:10*). The way of blessedness is to hear God’s beloved Son and act upon his example and commandments (*Mark 9:7; John 13:17*).

Jesus’ death conquered all principalities, powers and man-made philosophies (*Col 2:8,15*). Certain false teachers taught believers that spirituality was attained by observing various days and seasons, and by adhering to rigorous man-made rules. Paul replied:

Do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day. These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ... Since you died with Christ to the basic principles of this world, why, as though you still belonged to it, do you submit to its rules: “Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!”? These are all destined to perish with use, because they are based on human commands and teachings. Such regulations indeed have an appearance of wisdom, with their self-imposed worship, their false humility and their harsh treatment of the body, but they lack any value in restraining sensual indulgence (*Col 2:16-23 NIV*).

Jesus triumphed over all of these things on the cross with the result that his people are free to seek his kingdom first. Paul states the importance and specific goal of Christian liberty: “Ye have been called unto liberty; only use not liberty for an occasion to the flesh, but by love serve one another” (*Gal 5:13*). God’s people must be free in order to serve their neighbor. That’s why Paul was so upset when false teachers sought to put believers into various forms of bondage. He knew that if their liberty was taken away, they would be distracted from the priorities of Christ’s kingdom. Some of his strongest words were against those who threatened the liberty of Christians:

It was because some false brothers had infiltrated our ranks to spy on the freedom we have in Christ Jesus and to make us slaves. We did not give in to them for a moment, so that the truth of the gospel might remain with you (*Gal 2:4-5 NIV*).

Following Christ

Christ said to all who had come to him for salvation, “Take up thy cross, and follow me” (*Matt 16:24*). The apostle asserted that Christ died so that his people should no longer live for themselves, but for him who died for them (*2 Cor 5:15*). If you have indeed come to Christ for salvation from your sins, you must live a life that pleases him and not yourself. Because he loved you first, you must love him and his people fervently and keep his commandments (*1 John 4:7-11, 19-20*). What are his

commandments? How can I please him? The greatest command of our Lord is love. By bearing the burdens of others, we “fulfill the law of Christ” (*Gal 6:2*). The law of Christ was stated by Jesus in John 13:34, “A new commandment I give unto you, That ye love one another; as I have loved you, that ye also love one another.” All his commands flow out of this singular law to love others (*John 15:10-13*). The apostle Paul summed it all up when he said, “Walk in love” (*Eph 5:2*).

What shape will a life of love take? The best answer is found in Matthew chapters 5-7 (*also Luke 6:20-49*), where Jesus gives important teachings to his disciples, commonly called “the Sermon on the Mount.” There is much evidence to suggest that in the early church, Matthew 5-7 was used as a “handbook” to teach converts how to please the Lord in their daily walk with Christ. From the Sermon on the Mount we can glean at least ten major points concerning our life of loving obedience to the Lord.

(1) In order for our worship of God to be valid, we must first be sure we are reconciled to our brothers and sisters in Christ (*Matt 5:21-24*). If we know or sense that there is a rupture in our relationship with another believer, it’s our responsibility to seek reconciliation. Jesus said that this duty is so important that acts of worship must be interrupted in order to pursue the repairing of a broken relationship. This illustrates that we are deceived if we think we can have a deep relationship with God while our relationships with other believers are unreconciled (*see Matt 6:14-15*).

(2) It is not enough to abstain from the outward acts of sin, like adultery. Our innermost thoughts must be pure, that is, we must not even look on others with lust. We must take sin very seriously, and mortify the deeds of the flesh (*Matt 5:28-30; Rom 8:13*). In Christ’s day there were many religious leaders who prided themselves in their outward purity. But Jesus pointed out that inwardly they were filled with lust and evil thoughts, and that the “sinners” they condemned, would enter his kingdom instead of them. Jesus pronounced “blessedness” on the pure in heart, not upon those who strictly conformed to an outward code.

(3) Disciples of Christ are to be marked by truthful speech (*Matt 5:33-37*). Regarding the words of Christ: Let your “yea” be “yea” and your “nay” be “nay,” it has been well said:

Societies continue to employ the oath as a way of supporting truth and discouraging the lie. For disciples of Jesus, however, all that is unnecessary. Here, simple truth itself is the rule. Jesus wants us at all times to be direct, clear and simple in our speech, saying what we mean, no more and no less... Anyone who wants to be a disciple and participate in the life of Christian fellowship must declare his earnest desire and intention to speak the truth from his heart (*John W. Miller*).

(4) In a world filled with violence and schemes for revenge, Christ’s people are to love their enemies, do good to them, and pray for them (*Matt 5:38-39; 43-48*). When wronged we all have a tendency to strike back at those who hurt us. The way of Jesus requires that we never render evil for evil,

or seek revenge, but instead, overcome evil by doing good to our enemies (*Rom 12:17-21*).

Nothing characterizes our world more than conditional relationships: “I will be nice to you only as long as you are nice to me; I will help you only as long as you help me.” But those who follow Christ are to show a new way of love with no strings attached. “If you mistreat me, I will give you food and water; I will give to you with no concern for receiving anything back; if you curse me, I will return words of kindness; I will show love to you even if you continue to hate me.”

This example in this way of life is God himself. He shows innumerable kindnesses to those who hate him and are ungrateful. In spite of man’s wickedness, God persists in his kindness to him (*Luke 6:35*). Thus Jesus exhorts his people: “Be ye therefore merciful, as your Father also is merciful” (*Luke 6:36*).

(5) Christ’s disciples must do good works in the presence of God, not in order to be seen of men (*Matt 6:1-8, 16-18*). Jesus taught that when we give to others in need, or when we pray and fast, we must never do these things to impress onlookers, but we must act as those under the eye of God “which seeth in secret” and rewards accordingly (*Matt 6:18*).

(6) The community of believers is to be a place where forgiveness can be found (*Matt 6:12-15*). As we ask God to forgive our sins, a question then confronts us: Have we forgiven those who have sinned against us? Jesus said that if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins. For us to be freely forgiven by God, we must first have forgiven those who have wronged us. This again shows how important it is to maintain our relationships with those around us. We cannot harbor hatred and bitterness toward other people and expect to have fellowship with our Lord. We must not allow the sun to go down while we are still angry (*Eph 4:26*).

(7) Christ’s people must set their affections on things above (*Col 3:2*), and not on the things of this life. They must trust in the eternal God whom they cannot see, not in the temporal things that can be seen (*2 Cor 4:18*). Jesus knew that his followers would be tempted and allured by the things of the world, so he bid them to lay up treasures in heaven. He let it be known that people must choose between God and money. Believers do not need to trust in or seek the vanities of this life, because the Lord is committed to caring for his flock on earth. Jesus gave these comforting words, “Take no thought for your life, what ye shall eat, or what ye shall drink; nor yet for your body... for your heavenly Father knoweth that ye have need of all these things” (*Matt 6:25, 32*). As we seek his kingdom first, he will take care of our daily needs as he sees fit.

(8) In order to minister to others, believers must avoid a judgmental spirit (*Matt 7:1-5*). If we focus on the faults of others with a critical attitude, and do not deal with our own shortcomings, we remove ourselves from any possibility of ministering to others. If we judge others harshly and strictly, as if we are better than they are, Jesus said we then have cut ourselves off from helping them with their problems. In order for

the community of believers to be a place of help and healing, judgmental attitudes must be put away.

(9) Because there are so many false anti-gospel voices, Christ instructed his people to be discerning and observe the fruit in those who profess to lead the church (*Matt 7:15-23*). We tend to think that because some persons appear to do great things for Christ, that they are stars in his kingdom. However, Jesus solemnly warned us: “Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven.” Christ went on to say that there would be many in the last day who would claim to have preached, to have cast out demons, and to have done many wonderful works in his name, but he will affirm to them then that they were never his people and will cast them from his presence. Because of the presence of false teachers and antichrists, Christians cannot believe every spirit, but must test the spirits to see if they are of God (*1 John 4:1*).

(10) The teachings of Christ are the only sure foundation upon which to build our lives. Everything in the Christian life must be based on and flow out of what Jesus has done for us in his redemptive work (“as I have loved you”—*John 13:34; 15:12*) and what he has said to us as LORD (“I say unto you”—*Matt 5-7*). People who hear the words of Christ and fail or refuse to practice them build their lives upon the sand and are headed for a great crash when the storms of life come upon them. But his disciples hear his words, practice them, and build their lives upon the rock, Christ Jesus. When Jesus said, “Whosoever heareth these sayings of mine” (*Matt 7:24*), he specifically had in view the cluster of teachings found in Matthew 5-7—the Sermon on the Mount. It is upon this central core of Jesus’ teachings that we must build our lives to the glory of God.

“And it came to pass, when Jesus had ended these sayings, the people were astonished at his doctrine: for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes” (*Matt 7:28-29*). Indeed, Christ’s teachings call disciples to a radical life of loving, unselfish sacrifice. Anyone who seriously seeks to follow the Sermon on the Mount by God’s grace, will be marked as a “different” person, a person refusing to be squeezed into the mold of the world’s ways of doing things.

Practicing Christian Love in Local Churches

(1) If a man is lost in Adam we must in love exhort him to faith in Christ and repentance towards God.

(2) If a person is a brother or sister in Christ we must love them as Christ loved us (constantly, sacrificially, unconditionally).

A new commandment I give unto you, that ye love one another; as I have loved you, that ye also love one another. Hereby perceive we the love of God, because he laid down his life for us: and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren (*John 13:34; 1 John 3:16*).

(3) In general, Christians are to concretely edify (build up) one another as functioning priests in a local church (*1 Thess 1:5; 11,14*). Edification is realized through mutual support, encouragement, admonition, and has as its goal our conformity

to the image of Christ (*Rom 15:14; Heb 3:13; 1 Peter 4:10; Rom 8:29*).

Let us consider one another to provoke unto love and to good works...exhorting one another (*Heb 10:24-25*).

(4) In general, brothers and sisters are to fervently love one another, with a love that covers a multitude of sins, with a love that is quick to forgive, forbear, and that is always kind and longsuffering (*1 Peter 1:22; 3:8; 4:8; Col 3:13*).

Be ye kind one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ’s sake hath forgiven you (*Eph 4:32*).

(5) In all these duties, our words play a prominent role. Our mouths are to be used to build up, not to tear down (*Col 3:8,16; Eph 5:4; 1 Peter 4:11; James 3:10*). We must consciously make edification the goal of our speech, and avoid speaking evil of others, when we have not gone to the brother with our reservations. Love “thinketh no evil” (*1 Cor 13:5*).

Let no corrupt communication proceed out of your mouth, but that which is good to the use of edifying, that it may minister grace unto the hearers. Let all bitterness, and wrath, and anger, and clamour, and evil speaking, be put away from you, with all malice (*Eph 4:29,31*).

(6) In general, we are to strive in our actions and words for things that make for peace (*Rom 12:18*). We must pursue peace in our relationships with others. Being a “peacemaker” means that we will **(1)** follow Biblical principles to resolve sinful conflicts and problems; and **(2)** order our lives with a view toward effecting and promoting harmony (*Heb 12:14*).

Blessed are the peacemakers: for they shall be called the children of God (*Matt 5:9*).

(7) If a brother in Christ has something against you, you are to go to him and be reconciled.

Therefore if thou bring thy gift to the altar, and there rememberest that thy brother hath ought against thee; leave there thy gift before the altar, and go thy way; first be reconciled to thy brother, and then come and offer thy gift (*Matt 5:23-24*).

(8) If we have something against another brother, we are to go to him and be reconciled.

If thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone (*Matt 18:15*).

(9) If a strong brother partakes of something you abstain from, you are not to judge him (*Rom 14:3*).

(10) If a weak brother abstains from something you enjoy, you are not to despise him.

Let not him that eateth despise him that eateth not; and let not him which eateth not judge him that eateth: for God hath received him (*Rom 14:3*).

(11) In all things, weak and strong brethren are to seek one another’s welfare by pursuing peace and edification (*Rom 14:19*). Paul did not tell the vegetable-eater to start eating meat; nor did he tell the meat-eater to stop eating meat (*Rom 14:2-3*). Rather, Paul exhorts them both to have a Christ-honoring attitude of respect toward one another (*Rom 15:1-3,7*).

(12) If a saint falls into sin, we are to care for him by confronting the problem with his restoration in view (*Matt 18:15-16*).

Brethren, if a man be overtaken in a fault, ye which are spiritual, restore such an one in the spirit of meekness; considering thyself, lest thou also be tempted. Bear ye one another’s burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ (*Gal 6:1-2*).

(13) If a saint who has fallen into sin repents, we are to forgive and receive him (*Matt 18:21-22; Luke 17:3-4; 2 Cor 2:6-8*).

(14) If a professing brother has fallen into sin, has been lovingly confronted, and refuses to repent, the church must put him out of the assembly (*1 Cor 5:2,7*). Even this purging out of leaven is done in hopes of the ultimate restoration of the offender.

If thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone: if he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother. But if he will not hear thee, then take with thee one or two more, that in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established. And if he shall neglect to hear them, tell it unto the church: but if he neglect to hear the church, let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican (*Matt 18:15-17*).

(15) If we know (or believe) that a brother has something against us, or if we know we have something against a brother, or if we know (or believe) a brother is in some sin, or if we—for any reason—feel alienated from a brother, and we do not go to that brother for healing, we sin against Christ and our brother. The New Testament stresses the bond of fellowship among brethren. If we believe this bond is broken, we are obliged to go to others and heal the breach. This does not mean that we must all agree on everything. But it does mean that we cannot harbor bad thoughts about others.

(16) If a brother is walking disorderly (“out of ranks”), the brethren are to withdraw from him in order that he might be ashamed (*2 Thess 3:6,14*). In such cases, the person is to be admonished as a brother, not treated as an enemy (*2 Thess 3:15*). The goal here is for the brother to be brought back into step with apostolic teachings (*2 Thess 3:6,10,14*).

These propositions by no means exhaust the demands of love in Christian relationships. But I do believe that they isolate our basic duties to one another. I am convinced that these duties are scarcely practiced as they should be in our churches, and insufficiently reflected upon in our Christian experience. It is hard to go to another saint and deal with a problem. But love cares and love disciplines. We are in fact unloving if we skirt these duties in the name of “peace.”

Brothers and sisters, after you have read over and meditated on these propositions, I trust that the Spirit will move you to take action regarding the general and specific duties given in the New Testament. If we hear, but do not practice, we deceive ourselves (*James 1:22*). If we hear and do these things, we will be happy and blessed (*John 13:17; 15:11*).

This is the love of God, that we keep his commandments: and his commandments are not burdensome (*1 John 5:3 NKJV*).

—Adapted from the writings of Jon Zens

Salvation in Christ

When we read the Old Testament, we should look for promises about Jesus Christ who was to come, for he said all the Scriptures speak of him (*Luke 24:44; John 5:39,46*). He’s the Seed who crushes Satan’s head; he’s the Lamb of God; he’s the Prophet we’re to listen to; he’s the Priest who offers himself up to God; he’s the King who rules his people. The gospel commands us to believe in this One that God promised in the Old Testament and sent in the fullness of time. The gospel is “good news” that through belief in the death, burial and resurrection of Christ we can have forgiveness of sin and eternal life (*1 Cor 15:3-4*).

Jesus came into this world because of our sin problem. But why are we sinful? Because the first people God created, Adam and Eve, fell into sin (they disobeyed God’s will), and as a result we are born sinners, and experience the wages of sin, death and eternal condemnation (*Gen 3:1-19; Rom 5:12; 3:23; John 3:18*). Our sins have alienated us from God, who is holy and cannot allow the least sin into his presence. But Jesus never sinned, but always pleased his heavenly Father, and gave his life a sacrifice for sin. Being both God and man he could come between a holy God and sinful people (*1 Tim 2:5*). His blood provided an atonement (covering) so that sinners could be pardoned. Three days after his death on the cross, he arose, appeared to many witnesses for forty days, and then ascended to the Father’s right hand to make intercession for his people (*Acts 1:9; Rom 8:34*). He will come again gloriously to receive his people unto himself and to judge with everlasting punishment those who refuse to obey the gospel (*2 Thess 1:7-10*).

After his resurrection, Jesus said that repentance from sin and forgiveness of sin must be proclaimed to all nations (*Luke 24:47*). When ever anyone looks to Jesus by faith for the forgiveness of sins, they also repent of their sins. Repentance means that a person has godly sorrow for sin and turns from evil in order to practice righteousness (*2 Cor 7:1*). Paul put it in these words, “Ye turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God; and to wait for his Son from heaven” (*1 Thess 1:9-10*).

All who stop trusting in their “works” to be right with God (anything they can do or perform), and look by faith to Jesus Christ as their Substitute are accepted by God. God no longer sees the sins of those who believe in Christ, but sees the perfect life and work of his Son (*Rom 3:22; 5:18-19*). This is what it is to be “justified”—God accepting us on the basis of Christ’s finished work (*Rom 4:1-8*). Jesus told the story of a tax-collector who was convicted of his sins. He didn’t compare himself to others. He knew his best efforts could never satisfy God’s demands. Instead, he beat upon his breast, and said, “God be merciful to me a sinner.” Jesus said, “I tell you, this