

The Call of the Hour

by Ray C. Stedman

The task of Christianity is not primarily to get us ready for heaven. Though this has been the emphasis in past generations, it is, in itself, a relatively simple task as far as God is concerned. He gets us ready for heaven by an act of faith in Jesus Christ. The major task of Christian faith, however, is to equip us for life, to live life.

The message of the Scriptures, therefore, is how to handle life. I am not talking about ideal life, life as we can think of it on Sunday morning when we are removed from much of the rush and pressure of our days. No, I am talking about realistic life. Life with its pressures and problems, its joys and challenges, its heartaches and tears, its confusion and bafflement, its possibilities of greatness. We don't come here on Sunday mornings to huddle together and learn how to hang on. We come here to learn how to handle life so that we can go out and face the worst and still stand, undefeated! That is what Christianity is about.

Therefore, the purpose of the church (and this perhaps will help clarify our thinking these days when so much is troubled and confused in this area), is not to make the world a better place to live in – it is to make a better people to live in it. Then, as a kind of by-product, and always as that, these better people will make the world a better place. So to the church is given the secret of life.

Christians are the only ones who have that secret. I know that sounds conceited and arrogant, yet it is based upon the teaching of the Word of God from cover to cover. Christ is the secret of life. Christians have Jesus Christ, that is what makes you a Christian. Therefore, to Christians is given the secret of life. That is why the message of the church never changes no matter what the age, or the century, in which we find ourselves. That is also why it is always up-to-date. Only that message will meet the need of the world in which we

live. When the church forgets this and wanders off into peripheral paths, trying to produce the by-product directly, it loses its influence, its power, and its effectiveness.

Now Paul is very anxious that his readers never forget this fact. As we have been looking at the fourth chapter of Ephesians together, we have seen how he works out in practical detail the effect of this transforming secret in daily life. We learned that as this secret is put into practice, not simply believed, but put into practice –

- It makes a Christian stop lying and start telling the truth.
- It makes him stop losing his temper and start healing his relationships with those around him.
- It makes him stop stealing and start giving.
- It makes him stop talking dirty and start speaking wisely and helpfully and wholesomely.
- It even makes him stop harboring inner attitudes of hate, resentment, bitterness, envy, and malice and to start forgiving and being gracious and kind to those around him even when it is difficult to do so.

Yet the apostle never wants us to get so wrapped up in the results that we forget what produces them. That is the danger, isn't it? So many times we are so anxious to get to the end that we forget the pathway that leads to it. So in the midst of this practical dissertation of Chapter 4, the apostle breaks off to restate the great secret of Christian living.

Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God. {Eph 5:1-2 RSV}

That is a great declaration.

Perhaps we can analyze it best by gathering it in about four words:

The first is to note the apostle's exhortation to us here. "**Be imitators of God,**" he says. He put it flatly, bluntly, openly: "Be imitators of God." The word for *imitators* is the Greek word that means "to mimic," to be a mimicker of God. Mimics are those who follow the pattern or the example of God. Here is what Christians are to be. If you want to put it in one word, you can say it this way, "Be godlike." That is the goal of Christianity. It is to produce men and women, boys and girls, who are godlike in the midst of an ungodlike world. That is what it is all about.

Now notice, it does not say, "Be gods." That is what the cults say. That is the lie of the devil. That is the satanic twist to the original declaration of God. He distorts the truth and makes it come out as a promise to us that if we follow our own desires, throw overboard all restrictions, cast aside the bonds of authority, and do what we want to do, we can be gods. For, after all, isn't that what God does? He does what he wants; he is sovereign; he does what he likes. But that is a lie. This is not what the Christian faith says. It says rather, "be godlike," i.e., reflect the one true and holy God. There is only one God. There only can be one God. It is impossible to have more than one God. By definition, God is a supreme being. How many supreme beings can you have? Only one.

Therefore, the Christian message is to be like the one true God. Reflect him in your humanity. Be a godlike man. Be a godlike woman. From this we get our English word *godly*. After all, this word *godly*, which makes many of us cringe and feel uncomfortable, is simply a shortened form of the word *godlike*. That is all. It originally came from that word *godlikeness*. Godlikeness is godliness; godliness is godlikeness.

Now think about that for a minute.

What a challenge this is. I submit to you that there has never been a higher challenge ever set before human beings than this. Be godlike! Some

of you young people are looking for a cause you can follow. Youth everywhere today is seeking a cause. Well, what is better than this – be godlike? There it is. What a challenge! Be godlike in the midst of a world that is out to destroy godlikeness as far as possible. Be different. "Come out from among them" {2 Cor 6:17 KJV}, the Scriptures exhort. Be godlike. You can see this all through the New Testament. In the closing part of this letter the apostle puts it another way. He says, "Be strong." Everyone wants to be strong. "Be strong in the Lord and in the power of his might," {Eph 6:10 RSV}. The Lord Jesus put it this way. He said, "Be perfect, even as your heavenly Father is perfect," {cf, Matt 5:48}. Be godlike. That is the whole exhortation of Scripture.

Well, what is God like? What will you be like if you are godlike?

- Will you be strong? Yes, of course. We have already seen that. "Be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might." There is no strength like God's strength. His is the greatest strength there is. And to be godlike is to be strong.
- Will you be filled with power if you are godlike? Oh yes, but be careful. It is a different kind of power than the power the world desires. It is quieter, less apparent, but it is far, far mightier. The power the world admires is the power to destroy. The power of God is the power to unite. The Lord Jesus said, "He that is with me gathereth, but he that is against me, scattereth abroad," {cf, Matt 12:30, Luke 11:23}. In those two terms he describes the only two kinds of power there are in the world – power to gather, power to heal, power to bring together, to unite, or power to destroy, to break up, to shatter, fragment and divide. But that is what it means to be godlike. It is powerful.
- Will you be realistic if you are godlike? If there is anything that is the desire of youth today, it is to be realistic. The one sin they can never forgive is phoniness, unreality. Will you be realistic if you are godlike? Of course. God is the greatest realist there ever was. He is the utter realist. God always looks at life exactly

as it is. He treats people exactly as they are. He is forever tearing aside the veils of delusion we build around ourselves and revealing to us what we really are. That is realism.

- Well, will you be happy if you are godlike? Oh yes, but a different kind of happiness than the world is seeking after.
- Will you be attractive to others? By all means. There is nothing more attractive than God. He is the most dramatic, compelling, attractive Being that ever existed. Yet you will make some people hate you immediately if you are godlike, though at the same time they will respect you. That is what godliness always does.
- Will you be wise and kind? Of course, wiser and kinder than you have ever been before, because that is what God is.

I think we can sum all this up in two words. Despite all the works of God that are evident around us, both in the natural world and in the world of thought and ideas, there are really only two things that God ever does in human history: God creates and he redeems. Those are the two things. Everything in the whole universe gathers about these two. God creates and God redeems. God makes things live and God heals that which is broken. It is because God is life and God is love. He is therefore our Maker and our Healer. And that is what you will be if you become godlike. You will learn how to live, live as God intended life to be lived, to the fullest capacity of your humanity. And you will learn how to love and to heal, to restore and bring together instead of to scatter and fragment and break apart. For that is godlikeness. It is very desirable, isn't it? Who does not want to be like this?

But the question is, how does it happen? The apostle goes on from this exhortation to an explanation. There are two phrases here that tell us how. "Therefore," and then he adds, "as beloved children." "Therefore, ... as beloved children." One is the process of godlikeness and the other is the prerequisite to godlikeness. Let us take the last one first.

The **prerequisite to godlikeness** – "as beloved children." Why does he put that in? Because that is the only kind of people who can be imitators of God. It is his beloved children. Why only they? Because they alone have what it takes to be godlike. You see, you can never be godlike without God's life. After all, no man by himself can be like God. How can he? God is infinite and we are finite; he is perfect in all his ways and we so imperfect; he is unlimited and we so limited; he is wise and we so foolish. How can man be like God? Well, he can't in himself. The only one who can be godlike is God.

But the gospel, the good news, is, when by faith in God's promise you receive Jesus Christ, God's Son, into your life, his life becomes your life. That is the good news. "Christ in you, the hope of glory," {Col 1:27b}. His life becomes your life, as the Apostle John says, "He who has the Son has life, but he who does not have the Son of God does not have life," {cf, 1 Jn 5:12 RSV}. If you have all that he is, then you have all his resources, and that, of course, is how you can be godlike. By his strength, by his resources, not yours. "Be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might," {Eph 6:10 RSV}. That is how strength comes.

Now, that is the prerequisite to godlikeness. That is where you must begin. If you want to be godlike, start there. Receive Jesus Christ, God's Son. Invite him into your life. When you have his life, you can have what he is, godlikeness.

Now let's look at the **process to godlikeness**. "Therefore," he says – "therefore." That is a word that always looks back on something. He has already explained it once and he is simply referring to it again. Addressing Christians, God's beloved children, those who have been born into the family of God by faith in Jesus Christ, he says to them in Chapter 4, Verses 22-24,

Put off your old nature which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful lusts, and be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and put on the new nature, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness. {Eph 4:22-24 RSV}

This is what his “therefore” looks back upon. “Put off the old life,” he says. This is the natural human life we all receive by being born into the human family. We obtained it from Adam. Put off the old life as it manifests itself, and put on the new life “which is created after the likeness of God.” It is godlike! We learn from Scripture how to recognize the old life. We have already been looking at that. We have seen that the old life is always self-centered. Our desires, our aims, our ambitions, our program, our goals, our life – that is the old life. It expresses itself in lying, stealing and immorality, also in bitterness, hate, revenge, envy, unforgiveness, malice, fear, anxiety, boredom, restlessness, cruelty and a whole host of things. These are signs of the old life.

Now, again, let me say this. If you are not a Christian, don’t try to put these things away. You can’t do it, because you are part of the problem. Don’t try it on that basis. You’ll simply deceive yourself and shift from one form of it to another form, but you won’t get away from the problem.

You can’t. The way to be delivered is to come to the Deliverer, come to Christ. Begin there. I have already stressed that.

But now, if you are a Christian, and have come to Christ, you can do what he says. You can put away these things. Your will is involved in this: You look at this manifestation, and you put it away.

Someone says, “How do you do that? That is my problem!”

A woman said to me last week, “About this matter of putting off and putting on – how do you do that?” Well, if “put away” means nothing to you, let me use another term that Scripture uses. How do you put off the old life? The Scriptures say elsewhere, “confess.” That does not mean to say you are sorry. That is not confession. It means to agree with God about something. Label it what God labels it. Name it. Say it with God: *Con* means “with,” and *fess* means “to say.” To confess is to say with God what he says about it. That is confession.

The Holy Spirit will open your eyes to see yourself and you will become aware of these things in your life. You didn’t know before that they were there. You didn’t realize you were acting in these ways until you became a Christian. That is why you often become more miserable and unhappy at times as a Christian than you ever were before.

Then you were drifting on totally oblivious that you were like this, but now the light is on and you begin to see yourself. When you do, agree with it. That is confession.

Our immediate reaction is to defend ourselves, to react, to say, “Oh no, this isn’t me. You are talking about my neighbors. They are the ones. Look, I can give you a whole list of people who fit these qualifications, but not me.” But that isn’t confessing. Confessing is agreeing with God about what you are. Name it. Don’t argue with God about it.

And name it aloud. Bring it up out of the subconscious into the conscious and look at it and name it. The strange thing about human life and the thing, of course, that God knew about us all along is that what we verbalize, we are able to put aside. If you don’t name it, it has a strange power over you; it can go on forever. But if you look at it and name it, verbalize it, you can put it away. That is why the Scriptures say, “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness,” {cf, 1 Jn 1:9}.

A German pastor friend of mine gave me a treatise he wrote on the cure of anxiety which I have found to be very helpful. In it is an illustration I would like to borrow. He says that Christians are like a pond in the woods on which the leaves are constantly falling. These leaves fall one at a time, quietly, almost silently, upon the surface of the pond. The leaves are the manifestation of the old life. A little vanity, a little envy, a bit of prideful ambition, some unkindness, a sharp unlovely word spoken to another, a lie, some impurity, a bit of egotism; these are constantly falling upon the pond of our life. We don’t think they are very important. We think they are trivialities, mere passing things. They sink to the bottom and are forgotten, but they are still there. That is the problem. They are still there. There they lie and rot, and soon, in the deep subconscious part of our life, there is a foulness, a fetidness, a rottenness that stops the flow of the water and stagnates the pool. This foulness becomes fertile soil for anxiety. Fears arise within us. Nameless dreads and worries constantly throng us and bother us. In the quiet moments of our lives we seem to be able to master these better. When a pool of water is quiet, though the bottom is very dirty and foul, it isn’t very apparent. But let something agitate the water,

let something bother us, some circumstance irritate us, and the water of our lives is troubled and the dirt at the bottom whirls up and clouds our minds, befuddles and confuses us, and we act in panic, a panic of anxiety. But the Holy Spirit of God brings to our attention the things he is lifting up out of the bottom of our lives, dredging out the foulness. One by one these things are brought to our attention, and, if we name them, if we say, "Yes Lord, that is what I have done, that is what I do. Thank you for showing it to me," then we can put it away. Bit by bit it keeps coming up, all this foulness, until gradually the pool becomes clear again, sunlit, sparkling, and open. We have nothing left to hide. We don't try to cover over and pretend that we are something else. Then that pool, that pond that has been lying stagnant becomes a trickle of living water growing into a river at last that flows out in blessing to others.

That brings us to the third word here. Paul is going back, and looking over what he has covered, and giving it to us again. There is the exhortation, "be imitators of God." There is the explanation, "therefore, on the basis of putting off and putting on Christ, as beloved children." Now there comes the demonstration of this. "**Walk in love**" he says. That is the characteristic of a truly Christian life. I have discovered that here is another word that everybody thinks they know the meaning of and very few do: Love.

Do you know what it means to love? Well, it means that you begin to see others as people instead of things, instead of being objects of usefulness to you, or obstacles that hinder, you see them as people like yourself with the same problems you have with all the difficulties and all the yearnings and the heartaches. They are no longer people doing something to you. They are people you can do something for. That is the difference.

You discover, as you put on Christ in this way, and as you put off these old and ugly things, that your attitudes are changing. Once you wanted to use people and love things. Now you discover you are starting to love people and use things. That is the way God intended it:

- You suddenly are aware that the one you previously felt inferior to whenever you were with him, who always seemed to be so poised, so confident and certain, you now see to be but

putting up a front. But behind it is a lonely, needy person. You see that he has been assuming this poise, and behind this shell of assurance is a needy life. Perhaps you invite him out to lunch and you discover that this person who was such an obstacle to you is someone like yourself.

- Or the one that you feared or thought was cruel, indifferent, hateful and harsh, you see now as someone who has been badly hurt by life, who has grown defensive, who is afraid to let anybody in, who builds a rough wall around himself in order to protect himself. So you ignore the roughness and speak kindly to the man inside and you get a favorable reaction, one that you never expected. You find that if you continue, he responds.
- Or the one you saw as despised and weak and worthless, that useless person you never had any use for all of a sudden you see qualities of worth that you never saw before.

You are now learning to love. Christ is loving through you, though it feels like you doing it.

- You discover that there are things about people that you had never noticed.
- You have a new appreciation for them. Oh, you still see the old faults that bothered you once, but with them you see something else – something new. That is what it means to love.
- You want to help them, to uphold them, and, when you do so, without being aware of it, all of a sudden you discover that your life has become vital and interesting, fascinating and exciting. Now that is what God does. That is what godlikeness is.

Paul closes this with a wonderful illustration. He says,

Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God. {Eph 5:2b RSV}

That is what Christ was like. He was godlike.

In fact, the Lord Jesus Christ in his life remarkably reveals both God and man, the only person in all history who ever did. As the Son of God, he empties himself and endures the cross in order that he might save man. He is outgoing. He gives himself up, as Paul reminds us here. He is forever thinking of someone else. He is always reaching out toward someone else. And he went to the cross because he was forgetful of himself. He endured the cross, he emptied himself in order to save man. But as the Son of Man, he denies himself and takes up his cross in order to glorify God. There you have the two brought together. God, always reaching out to bless man, and man, if he learns the secret of his life, lives to glorify God.

When you have that, you have a harmony that is constantly working together to produce the won-

der of the age, a godlike man. A man in whom God dwells. "Be ye imitators of Him."

Prayer:

Our Father, what a magnificent theme you have set before us here. Our imaginations are captured by it. Our hearts respond to it. This is what we have always wanted to be like. We can hardly believe our ears that here in this book which by the Holy Spirit is given to us, you are telling us how this can be possible. Lord, teach us to listen. "He that has ears to hear, let him hear," that there might break out in our lonely, bewildered, confused age the wonder of godlikeness. We pray in his name, Amen.

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