

CHRISTLIKE LIVING IN A CHRISTLESS SOCIETY

SERIES: DEVELOPING A CHRISTIAN LIFESTYLE IN A POST-CHRISTIAN SOCIETY

by Ron Ritchie

"In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. And the earth was formless and void, and the darkness was over the surface of the deep; and the Spirit of God was moving over the surface of the waters. Then God said, 'Let there be light'; and there was light."
(Genesis 1:1-3.)

This was possible because "God is light, and in Him there is no darkness at all" (1 John 1:5); and he is "the Father of lights" (James 1:17).

Light brings life and the truth of any present reality. Physical light is but a symbol of the spiritual light necessary for life in a fallen humanity that has rebelled against God. So God sent his Son Jesus into this darkened world, for "In Him was life; and the life was the light of men. And the light shines in the darkness; and the darkness did not comprehend it" (John 1:4-5). Then Jesus, "the light of the world" (John 9:5), challenged his disciples because of their relationship with him, "You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do men light a lamp, and put it under a peck-measure [basket], but on the lamp stand; and it gives light to all who are in the house. Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven." (Matthew 5:14-16.)

Each new generation of Christians living as "new creatures" (2 Corinthians 5:17) needs to be reminded of this spiritual reality, because we have three enemies that will never go away until Christ comes again as Lord of lords and sets up his kingdom of righteousness on this earth: (1) Satan comes into the Christian community disguised as an "angel of light" (2 Corinthians 11:14). (2) Our flesh (the old sin nature) seeks to dim the light of truth as it pulls on us through powerful memories to follow its evil desires (see Galatians 5:16f). And finally (3) the current world system on its course toward destruction seeks every day to interpret our present reality without God's spiritual light (see Ephesians 2:1-3).

Fortunately, in every generation our risen Lord raises up godly men and women who are able to help us remember the spiritual realities of our relationship with Jesus Christ and our calling to be the light of the world. One of those godly men today is Charles Colson, who founded Prison Fellowship Ministries, after spending some time in prison himself (where he met Jesus Christ as his Lord and Savior) for breaking the law when he served as an aid under President Nixon. Colson's newest book, *The Body: Being Light in Darkness*, is a thoughtful and challenging work about the meaning and ministry of the body of Christ, the church in the post-Christian era (see in particular pages 165-182). In this book he seeks to show us the current thinking of the world and its definition of truth in contrast to the truth that is found in Jesus Christ. He reminds us that current western thinking is based on the foundation of relativism, the belief that there are no absolutes in truth and morals (except the absolute that there can be no absolutes). Truth is determined by a majority vote.

Colson writes, "Although the West is still called a 'Christian culture' by some, it is not. It is a distinctly post-Christian, dominated by a relativistic world-view." He then discusses five pillars our leaders are building on the foundation of relativism.

(1) The current world-view is secular, of this world or this present age; and it is best articulated, "If I want what I want when I want it, why not take it? I want it all and I want it now!"

(2) The current world-view is antihistorical, which means that it is bringing into question the

truth of the past; whether in history, law, politics, or religion. The key to the past is what we think of what the authors wrote of it. The recent movie *JFK* took truth and changed it around to create another whole story based somewhat on facts but more heavily on the imagination of the author.

(3) The current world-view is naturalistic. Because there is nothing beyond what we see and feel (there is no supernatural), the natural is supreme; therefore all nature is equal and there is no longer a reason for humanity to be considered the center of the universe. Thus Earth Day gets more press and participation than Easter. And we find our western world more concerned about the killing of white seals than about the abortion of millions of fetuses this year.

(4) The current world-view is utopian. Men and women are born basically good, and since we are our own gods we can create our own brave new world through knowledge, education, and technology. This myth of man's goodness blinds him to current world conditions in which evil reigns in brutal rulers, civil wars, genocide, murder, greed, homeless children, teenage gangs, and drugs, to mention but a few of its forms.

(5) The current world-view is pragmatic. Since there is no objective truth, everyone determines reality by saying, "If it works, do it," in contrast to truth that is found in Christ only. For instance, you might be instructed in the work-place to be friendly to customers, not because they have value or because it is the ethical thing to do, but simply because it makes money---it works.

When the apostle Paul came into Europe for the first time in 52 AD, he was aware of the spiritual warfare he would have to confront from the devil, the flesh, and the world system, which was built on pagan Roman and Greek philosophies (many of which are still stirring among us). As we begin our study in 2 Corinthians 2:12-6:2 we will be looking at a most difficult time in the life and ministry of the apostle Paul. But it is out of those most difficult days, as he sought to remain a light in the darkness of his world, that we will discover many spiritual truths that will help us to be light in the darkness of our current world. Let's turn to 2 Corinthians 2:12-17, where we will begin to be reminded of the principles that will enable us to remain Christlike---with all the joy and suffering that involves---in a world that is becoming more and more Christless.

Troubled in the human spirit

2 Corinthians 2:12-13

Now when I came to Troas for the gospel of Christ and when a door was opened for me in the Lord, I had no rest for my spirit, not finding Titus my brother; but taking my leave of them, I went on to Macedonia.

First, let's set the scene by looking at the background to this letter. According to Acts 18, Paul and his disciples arrived in Corinth, Greece in 52 AD and were soon able to establish a church. Paul stayed for about eighteen months, left Corinth, and went east into the pagan city of Ephesus and then on to Jerusalem. Later he returned to Ephesus, where he wrote the letter to the Corinthians we now call 1 Corinthians. In 56 AD Paul received word in Ephesus that some false prophets had infiltrated the church at Corinth (see 2 Corinthians 11:15), confusing the believers by launching an attack against Paul's apostleship, ministry and even his personality.

Paul responded by writing to them "with many tears" (2 Corinthians 2:4) a letter that he gave to his disciple Titus to hand-carry to the Corinthians. In that letter he was looking forward to reconciliation with the Corinthians. He waited for Titus in Troas for awhile, anxious to hear how it went in Corinth. He was invited to minister there, but his struggle was so intense that he declined; "having no rest for [his] spirit," he traveled west into Europe and the city of Philippi, Greece and may have lodged in the home of Lydia (whom he had

introduced to Christ on his second missionary journey).

While waiting in Philippi he had reason to write a thankful letter to the Corinthians, which we now call 2 Corinthians. In this letter Paul shares with them his feelings as he awaited their response to the previous painful letter, and also how he learned to trust in his risen Lord Jesus for power, protection, open doors, and adventure as he waited on the Lord.

Live in the presence of God 2 Corinthians 2:14-17

But thanks be to God, who always leads us in His triumph in Christ, and manifests through us the sweet aroma of the knowledge of Him in every place. For we are a fragrance of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing; to the one an aroma from death to death, to the other an aroma from life to life. And who is adequate for these things? For we are not like many, peddling the word of God, but as from sincerity, but as from God, we speak in Christ in the sight of God.

We are going to find that this is a passage about making choices. It is important as we go through it to keep in mind the role the Holy Spirit plays in the choices we make. Now, before you and I placed our faith in Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior, we were our only lord and savior. And that meant that each day of our lives we were slaves to our flesh, our sinful Adamic nature. We were able to choose only those things that satisfied the desires of our flesh, but all those choices were contrary to the will of God. But at the moment you and I placed our faith in Jesus Christ as our personal Lord and Savior, we were given eternal life, forgiven for our sins, called his children, and given the wonderful gift of the person and power of the Holy Spirit, who enabled us for the first time in our lives to be Christlike in a Christless society (2 Corinthians 6:9-11). We were given the choice between living under the control of the flesh or living under the control of the Holy Spirit. Ray Stedman would always remind our staff that:

We have never been given the power to do, only the power to choose. What we choose determines what we do. If we choose as Christians to follow our own fleshly desires, the flesh takes over and produces death. If we choose to follow the leading of the Holy Spirit, He takes over our lives and produces life. The indwelling Holy Spirit, then, is the one who gives us the power to choose to make godly decisions, and once we make that godly decision He provides the power necessary to carry out our godly desires.

As we look at 2 Corinthians 2:14-17 we should be greatly encouraged by Paul. As he sought to make Christlike choices in his corrupt world, so we should be seeking to make Christlike choices in our own corrupt and post-Christian society, depending on the Holy Spirit to keep us walking as the light of Christ in a darkened world. In this passage Paul tells us five choices we need to make in order to remain Christlike in our Christless society.

1. Choose to thank God in our present circumstances

"But thanks be to God...." Paul challenges the current world-view of naturalism, which does not believe in the supernatural, by breaking out in thanksgiving to the one and only living God who is above and beyond his creation. What has happened to Paul between verses 13 and 14 to make him utter this cry of thankfulness? It's obvious he is not thankful that he had had to write his painful letter to the Corinthians, or that Titus hadn't met him in Troas, or that the church in Corinth was being subverted by false apostles. Nor is he thankful for his conflict with the church there, for the lost opportunity to preach the gospel at Troas, or for the stress he experienced on his journey to Macedonia.

We discover the reason for Paul's thankfulness in 2 Corinthians 7:5-7: "For even when we came into Macedonia our flesh had no rest, but we were afflicted on every side: conflicts without, fears within. But God,

who comforts the depressed, comforted us by the coming of Titus; and not only by his coming, but also by the comfort with which he was comforted in you, as he reported to us your longing, your mourning, your zeal for me; so that I rejoiced even more." Paul was thankful that God was able to work above and beyond his stressful circumstances, particularly in this situation in which all he could do was pray; for he couldn't change the hearts of the Corinthians. But Titus reported to him that the Corinthians had accepted the painful letter. They had repented of their attitude toward him, and they were dealing with the issue of sexual immorality in the church. Paul had had no peace of mind in Troas while he waited for Titus, and he was harassed at every turn on his way to Macedonia; but God was already at work changing the hearts of the Corinthians. No wonder Paul is able to say, "Thanks be to God!" God can work in a much greater way than we can ever ask or think.

I received a phone call last week from a young man who had recently become a believer in Jesus Christ. He had spent his life as a slave to the current secular world system and was in bondage to sexual immorality. When he became a follower of Christ he found himself still struggling with his old life in the area of sexual desires. This was compounded by the problem that he had moved in with a woman who was a new Christian also. With some teaching from the word of God, this couple prayed that the Lord would give them wisdom and courage to live godly lives. They agreed together to ask the Lord to give them the power to avoid becoming involved in sexual immorality. After a few weeks he said he just had to call me to tell me that since he had made that decision his heart had been filled with joy toward God and that they had both experienced the courage to move out of their apartment and find separate lodging, while remaining good friends. He also told me that they both desire to grow in the knowledge of Jesus Christ. It was a most encouraging phone call on a rainy day last week. "Thanks be to God!"

The foundational principle of Paul's life was thankfulness. He encouraged the Thessalonian church, "...in everything give thanks; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus" (1 Thessalonians 5:18). One of the keys to having a Christlike lifestyle in a Christless society, then, is to choose to be thankful to God that he is above and beyond his creation, thus making him free to work out all our present circumstances to his honor and glory. As a result of that conscious choice on our part, the Lord by his Holy Spirit will fill our hearts with thankfulness toward him.

2. Choose to realize God's consistent triumph in Christ

"...who always leads us in His triumph in Christ..." In these words, Paul illustrates the truth that no matter what the circumstances, even those that look like utter defeat, Christians are always victorious in their walk with Christ. They can't lose! He is comparing the Christian's victory with the spectacle of the triumphal processions that were awarded to victorious Roman army generals in that first century AD. These processions were awarded to generals who (1) were supreme commanders in the field of battle, (2) defeated and pacified the people, (3) brought their troops home safely, (4) gained new territory, and (5) won a victory over a foreign power. These processions were awe-inspiring. The whole populace of Rome flocked to see the parade of standard-bearers carrying the flags of the various military units; the reclining statue of Jupiter, the supreme god of Rome, being carried along; carts containing the spoils of war; paintings and models of the conquered territory; musicians playing pipes; white bulls (which were to be sacrificed to the gods later); prisoners in chains marching to their death; horn-blowers; priests swinging pots of incense; captured kings and chieftains being carried in carts; other groups of prisoners; a golden chariot drawn by four white horses and driven by the victorious general, the wreath of Jupiter held over his head by a slave; the general's family; the victorious army in full uniform, shouting, "Lo! Triumph!"; and finally the Roman senators, and magistrates.

The apostle uses the spectacle of a Roman triumphal procession to illustrate the glory of the Christian's everyday experience in Christ; yet the victorious generals of Rome might get one or perhaps two triumphal parades in their lifetime, while Christians experience "Lo! Triumph!" day in and day out as we trust our risen Lord to lead us. Every day, come what may, even through what looks like utter and absolute defeat, our risen Lord always leads us in his triumph as he wins spiritual battles over "spiritual forces in the heavenly realm" and over the influences of our old nature and the world system. When things seem to be falling apart, Christians can cry, "Lo! Triumph!" no matter what the circumstances in the kitchen, at work and play, at the grave of a friend or loved one, at the side of an abandoned family, or when we find we've lost our jobs in this rapidly-changing valley. We are in Christ; therefore, all through our lives we are part of his continuing

triumphal procession.

3. Choose to allow the perfume of Christ to flow out of us

Further, Paul says, "...and manifests through us the sweet aroma of the knowledge of Him in every place." Here the apostle is thinking of how the priests in the triumphal procession carried pots of incense from which the fragrance floated over the whole procession. Paul compares Christians to incense pots: they carry within them everywhere the aroma of Christ so that those who come in contact with them experience the fragrance of the person of Christ. Christians will take that aroma of Christ into all kinds of situations. The fragrance will not disappear nor will it be restricted. It will linger long after they have left any group, individual, or situation.

But that fragrance of the knowledge of Christ comes to the nostrils of two very different groups, Paul says. It comes to "those who are being saved." In his illustration these would have been healthy and useful slaves---cooks, household servants, administrators, etc.---who were taken to the slave markets to be sold and scattered throughout the populace, many of them to be set free later. The second group Paul refers to are "those who are perishing." These were the captured and humiliated kings and chieftains along with the sick, rebellious, and aged. All of these were taken to a tent following the parade and strangled. Thus the incense was to them the smell of death.

When Paul and Barnabas were sent out by the church of Antioch on their first missionary journey, they came to the city of Paphos on the island of Cyprus. There they met the governor Sergius Paulus and the false prophet Bar-Jesus. Paulus, who was in the process of being saved, wanted to hear the gospel, while Bar-Jesus, a son of the devil who was in the process of perishing, opposed them and sought to turn the governor away from the faith. However, Paul, being filled with the Holy Spirit, caused him to become blind for awhile, and Paulus responded to the truth of the gospel and placed his faith in Jesus as his Lord because of the teaching of these disciples (see Acts 13:1-12). The gospel cuts both ways.

4. Choose to accept our relationship with God

There is another reason Paul says, "...we are a fragrance of Christ to God," and that is that we are always acceptable in the sight of God. We smell good to him! When God looks at the life of a Christian he regards him or her as totally acceptable because he looks at us through Christ. That's good news. I wouldn't want anybody to see the video tapes of my life before I came to Christ. Each and every one of us who have placed our faith in Jesus as our Lord and Savior have had all our sins placed on Christ at the cross, and we now stand in a forgiven state before the one and only living and Holy God. That is why we are acceptable to God. Paul would write to the Romans, "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus...For all who are being led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God. For you have not received a spirit of slavery leading to fear again, but you have received a spirit of adoption as sons by which we cry out, 'Abba! Father!'" (Romans 8:1, 14-15). We are accepted by God as his beloved children, and nothing can change that. The prophet Isaiah wrote:

"I will rejoice greatly in the LORD,
My soul will exult in my God;
For He has clothed me with garments of salvation,
He has wrapped me with a robe of righteousness..."
(Isaiah 61:10)

"And who is adequate for these things?" At this point Paul reflects on what he has just written, challenging his spiritual children as well as himself with this question. That is, who is equal to such a task? For he has just given them a key to living out their Christianity in a Christless society. They were to consciously choose to be thankful to God regardless of the surrounding circumstances, to see God's victories in the midst of apparent defeats, to allow the perfume of Christ to be carried inside them, and to accept their relationship with God their Father because of their position in Jesus Christ.

There is a two-part reason Paul asks the question, "Who is adequate for these things? The first part is the bent of our human nature to look at something like this list and say to ourselves, "I can keep that list of requirements." The Jews said that when Moses handed them the Law (see Exodus 24:3-8; Hebrews 9:19-22). So God instructed Moses to sprinkle the people with the blood of their animal sacrifice as a symbol of forgiveness for their sin of self-confidence.

The other part is the trial that Paul and his disciples had experienced in Asia, which had prevented them from keeping their promise to come and visit the Corinthians when they said they were going to (see 2 Corinthians 1:15-22). But it was out of this difficult trial that Paul unfolded the mystery of Christlike living in a Christless society: "For we do not want you be unaware, brethren, of our affliction which came to us in Asia, that we were burdened excessively, beyond our strength, so that we despaired even of life; indeed, we had the sentence of death within ourselves in order that we should not trust in ourselves, but in God who raises the dead; who delivered us from so great a peril of death, and will deliver us, He on whom we have set our hope" (2 Corinthians 1:8-10).

5. Choose to live with integrity

In contrast to the current world-view of pragmatism in which we are all encouraged, "If it works, do it!" regardless of whether it violates any known morality, Paul seeks to encourage the Corinthian Christian community: "...we are not like many, peddling the word of God...." False apostles had begun to peddle the word in the Corinthian church. They were watering down the Scriptures (see 2 Corinthians 4:2), trying to make them more palatable to the Corinthians. Here Paul contrasts his Christ-centered ministry with their self-centered ministry. He lists four characteristics of Christian integrity.

(1) Sincerity: In ancient times in Corinth there were potters (and there still are today) who made wonderful clay pots and sold them in the marketplace. But sometimes when a pot came out of the oven the potter would discover that the fire had cause the pot to crack a bit. So he would fill the crack with some hot wax, and then when the wax cooled he would paint a picture over it and place the pot on the table outside his shop in the morning. By noon, however, the wax would begin to melt, and soon the customers would come to the realization that the pot had wax; it was insincere. Paul says that he chooses to live his life by the power of God, resulting in a life of sincerity, literally without wax. He was the genuine article.

(2) As from God, or called by God: Our goal is to proclaim the good news of reconciliation between God and man through Christ Jesus.

(3) We speak in Christ: We are not self-appointed, but ambassadors of Christ who speak his message with authority from him.

(4) Finally, we live in the sight of God: We seek to live transparent lives (as we will later see, lives without veils) by his power. Paul is saying, "You Corinthians know that our life and power come from the resurrected Jesus working through us. We are always conscious that our lives and words are seen and heard by God the Father, so we seek to live and speak in awareness of his eternal power and presence."

In a society of shifting morals standards and a community given over to "speaking with a forked tongue," I was reminded recently of an event that occurred a few years ago when our staff was invited to a large pastors meeting in Houston, Texas. One of the seminars was to be led by Chuck Swindoll, but he seemed to be running late. Finally he appeared on the platform before a large and admiring crowd. He looked awful--his suit was all wrinkled, his eyes were bloodshot, his hair was not quite in place, and he needed a shave. As he stood before that crowd I was sure he was tempted to tell them that he had been involved in some kind of spiritual warfare that lasted all night, but he had resisted the temptation and arrived victorious to teach them the Scriptures. Instead he told them the truth: He had forgotten the meeting, but as soon as his secretary reminded him of it he booked a ticket from LA to Houston; unfortunately, it was the red-eye flight. Once he arrived that

morning he discovered that the airline had lost his luggage. He arrived at his room and washed his face and then realized that his Bible was in his luggage, so he borrowed a Gideon Bible from his hotel room. Then he said with a big smile, "So opening our Gideon Bibles, let's look at...." Here was a sincere man of God.

We are now living in what many knowledgeable Christian leaders call a post-Christian age. There are many spiritual forces in the society of this age that are seeking to include us in the shifting sands of their moral and spiritual values while rejecting the firm foundation of absolute truth that is found in Jesus Christ and his word.

We must also be aware of the fallacy of each of the five pillars that are built on that relativistic foundation: Secularism: Who we are and what we do has eternal value. Antihistoricalism: The God of history sent his "light of the world" to invade this kingdom of darkness. Naturalism: The supernatural God freely works outside of that which he has created. Utopianism: Man is born a sinner and needs a savior, namely Jesus Christ. Pragmatism: We choose to do only that which conforms to God's moral standards.

Be greatly encouraged---our risen Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, the one who once declared to his disciples, "I am the light of the world," also told them, "You are the light of the world." You and I have been called by our one and only living God to take the light of truth and life into a darkened society. We are called to be Christlike in a Christless society. To be Christlike is to choose by the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit to be thankful to God; to realize that he is behind all our present circumstances leading us in his triumph in Christ; to be conscious that we are a perfume of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing; to believe that we are accepted by God; and to minister with spiritual integrity by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Catalog No. 4335
2 Corinthians 2:12-17
First Message
Ron Ritchie
February 28, 1993

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