

10. Christian Morality



Paul has just warned the Christians in Colossae to avoid immoral behaviour. He is about to share with them one of the most beautiful statements in all his letters of the way they should live. Before we read this it is important to highlight the specifically Christian dimension of the moral teaching of Paul.

The Stoics of Paul's day had worked out a system of ethics based on their understanding of human nature. Christians of a later period were fond of expressing their moral teaching in the terms of the current ethical philosophy, both in order to appeal to their non-Christian contemporaries in language that was understandable, and to support the reasonableness of the Christian position. This procedure has an obvious validity, but it must not be allowed to obscure the truth that when Paul speaks of moral behaviour he invariably argues not from an understanding of human nature and its requirements but from the example of Jesus who shares with the believer his Spirit.

Christian living is modelled on that of Jesus and is possible because of the Spirit of Jesus dwelling in us. A person cannot live Christian morality without faith. It obviously cannot be imposed on non-believers, for it is one of the fruits of the Holy Spirit. For this reason, Paul's urging is an appeal from the risen Christ, and is made 'in the Lord' and 'through the Lord Jesus', that is to say, in communion with him and with his authority.

Paul is not simply offering suggestions. He is speaking of how Christians ought to live. The obligations are not because they are human but because they are disciples of Jesus. Being human and being a disciple of Jesus are not in opposition. In fact Jesus, being sinless, is perfectly human. The call to live as humanly as Jesus, however, is not made because of the moral strength that Christians should have as human beings, but because they share in Jesus' Spirit.

Living a moral life as a Christian is not something we can acquire by our own efforts. It is not a triumph of personal endeavour.

To live a virtuous life self-discipline is necessary, but, as Paul states clearly in his Letter to the Galatians when he speaks of virtues, these are the 'fruit of the Spirit' (Galatians 5:22), not achievements of the self. Paul came to see that we should let go our ego and let the Spirit of Christ fill our hearts and direct our lives.

We are called and graced to let 'Christ live in us' (Galatians 2:19).

As Christians we are to 'clothe ourselves with the Messiah' (Galatians 3:27);

'Put on the Lord Jesus the Messiah' (Romans 13:14).

For Christians virtue is before all else a grace. We are to 'behave in a manner worthy of the vocation to which we have been called' (1 Thessalonians 2:12),

and we do this by living 'in the Messiah' (an expression used by Paul eighty-five times in his letters).

We are graced to be able to say with Paul: ‘It is no longer I who live; it is the Messiah who lives in me. The life I live now in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, loving me and giving himself for me’ (Galatians 2:20). Fundamental to our living a moral life as disciples of Jesus is our sharing Jesus’ faith (Galatians 2:16; 3:22).

Jesus revealed God as love. He gave us an example of what it means to welcome God’s love and live by it, but he did more than that – and this takes us to the essential foundation of Christian morality. Jesus continues to give his disciples a share in his faith in God and in his love. We can live a moral life because: ‘God has sent the Spirit of his Son into your hearts, crying, “Abba (Father)!”’ (Galatians 4:6).

In Galatians 5:19-21 Paul has a list of vices. It is important to note that he follows this list, not with a list of virtues that we might acquire by our own efforts, but with examples of what he calls 'the fruit of the Spirit': 'The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control' .

We are not surprised to find that the first fruit of the Spirit is 'love'. As he wrote earlier in the letter: 'the only thing that counts is faith working through love'.

Paul is speaking of something more than the spontaneous feeling that develops with one's spouse or family. He is speaking of something more than passionate desire, or the affection experienced between friends. He is speaking of the recognition one has of the value of another person in the light of what God has revealed in Christ. He is speaking of the decision to give one's life for others the way Christ gave his life for us. 'Love', as used here by Paul, speaks of faithful commitment to God and to people whatever feelings circumstances may cause to arise within us. However, love is not something that we can choose to do of ourselves. Love comes from God, and is a gift to us from the heart of Jesus through his Spirit.

Paul ends his list of virtues with 'self-control'. This is not control by the self. Rather, it is the control that we experience when we open ourselves to Jesus and to the gift of his Spirit. It is allowing ourselves to be directed by him. It is being, like Paul, a 'slave of Christ'. It is to 'live by the Spirit', to be 'led by the Spirit'.

If we do this, then the Spirit will cause these fruits to grow in our lives. Rather than our struggling to obey a law etched on stone, we are to open our hearts and minds to the call of the Spirit, and allow Christ to live in us .

Christian morality is a morality of love, the love revealed by Jesus on the cross. It is not an achievement of the self. It is a fruit of the Spirit. It is not possible without faith, but it is possible with it, and it is here that Paul places his emphasis.

If we open our hearts to welcome grace, the Spirit will cause these fruits to grow in our lives. Rather than our struggling to obey a law etched on stone, we are to open our hearts and minds to the call of the Spirit, and allow Christ to live in us (Galatians 2:20).

Christian morality is a morality of love, the love revealed by Jesus on the cross. It is not an achievement of the self. It is a fruit of the Spirit. It is not possible without faith, but it is possible with it, and it is here that Paul places his emphasis. More and more we are to allow Jesus' Spirit to penetrate every aspect of their lives. To 'belong to Christ' (Galatians 3:29) demands that we die to our selfishness (Galatians 5:24) and give our lives in love for others.

As Jesus' disciples we rely, not on our own moral strength, but on the love of the Risen Jesus to whom we look to purify our loving. We are called and graced to be holy. Holiness is what the Spirit does in our lives:

'We must always give thanks to God for you, brothers and sisters beloved by the Lord, because God chose you as the first fruits for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and through belief in the truth' (2 Thessalonians 2:13).

Holiness is before all else a matter of love, and it is this love that we are to give and receive in the bosom of the Christian community.

We think of Jesus' description of the way in which the father welcomed home his wayward son: 'While he was still far off, his father saw his son and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him' (Luke 15:20).

It is this same compassionate and persistent love that Jesus himself manifested in the way he lived and in the way he died. It is a gift to us from the heart of Jesus pierced on the cross (John 19:34).

This is the gift of the Spirit, the fountain of living water which flows from Jesus' breast and wells up in our own (John 7:38).

Paul has already written: ‘You must live your whole life according to the Messiah you have received – Jesus the Lord. You must be rooted in him, built on him’ (Colossians 2:6-7).

He goes on to speak, not of virtues that they should acquire (as one might find in the Stoic manuals of the day), but of the qualities of the Messiah that they have been clothed in.

Paul is not suggesting that we model ourselves on Christ ‘from the outside’. It is not a matter of our becoming like Christ – certainly not by virtue of our own striving. Rather, we are to allow the life of Jesus to bear fruit in our lives.

Colossians 3:14 speaks of ‘love’ and 3:15 of ‘peace’. Both of these are listed as fruits of the Spirit in Galatians 5:22.

It is in love that ‘we have come to fullness in him’ (Colossians 2:10).

It is love that informs all the other virtues, giving them that special quality that identifies them as Christian. It is in experiencing our love (the outer garment that people first see) that others come to experience, through us, the love of Christ.

In his Second Letter to the Christian community in Corinth (55AD) Paul teaches that living a moral life as a Christian is possible because 'If anyone is in the Messiah, there is a new creation' (2 Corinthians 5:17). Judgment of value for the Greeks rested on reason. Paul is clearly appealing to something that transcends reason.

His key criterion is not conformity to human nature. He appeals to the Corinthians to 'examine yourselves to make sure you are in the faith; test yourselves. Do you acknowledge that Jesus the Messiah is in you' (2 Corinthians 13:5). Salvation, for Paul, comes through an act of God's gracious love. It is seen in Jesus and the invitation God gives through Jesus for us to live by the same divine Spirit that inspired and gave life to Jesus.

Morality for Paul is the fruit of this saving love. It is impossible without this love. Paul does not argue for the logic of his positions, or attempt to demonstrate that they are inherently consistent. He does not present Christian moral conduct as something to be lived by anyone who might choose to do so. Paul invites people to faith, he invites them into the Christian community, he shows what is possible for a Christian. For himself he prays, not for greater rationality or more determined effort, but that 'the power of the Messiah may stay over me' (2 Corinthians 12:9).

In his Letter to the Romans (57AD) Paul exhorts the Christians, not to be more self disciplined, but to 'put on the Lord Jesus the Messiah' (Romans 13:14). Morality is the fruit of God's liberating love: it is the Messiah living in us. It is impossible to live a moral life free from sin without this gift, even with the law. The gift of 'being alive to God in the Messiah Jesus' (Romans 6:11) is, however, offered to all, without distinction, Jew and Gentile alike.

Paul invites people to faith. He invites people into the Christian community. He invites us to belong to Jesus and to experience his indwelling Spirit. He shows what fruit can come from such a union, fruit that without such a union is quite impossible. For Paul, living with 'clean hands and a pure heart' (Psalm 24:4) is possible because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us' (Romans 5:5).

To the community in Philippi (62AD) Paul writes: 'If there is any appeal in the Messiah, any consolation from love, any communion in the Spirit, any movements of compassion and feelings of love, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being of one soul and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition. Do not strive after or seek to find your value in things that are worthless, but in humility regard others above yourselves, so that everyone is not focused on themselves, but each is looking to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in the Messiah Jesus' (Philippians 2:1-5).

This goes beyond the training Paul received as a Jew, or the Stoic philosophy that he learned in Tarsus.

It is a new basis for moral living, possible because of the gift of Jesus' mind, heart and Spirit.

The 'compassion' he is speaking of is 'the compassion of the Messiah Jesus' (Philippians 1:8).

The righteousness that Paul lives is 'not a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through the faith of the Messiah, the righteousness from God based on faith' (Philippians 3:9).

Sharing in Jesus' communion with God, the Christian shares in Jesus' faith, and it is this communion that is the basis of living a Christian life.

Paul continues: 'Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever inspires reverence, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever attracts to love, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, and if there is anything worthy of praise, give consideration to these things. Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you' (Philippians 4:8-9).

To live a Christian life we need to open ourselves to receive the power of God into our lives. Only this love, as lived by Jesus, can bring healing and meaning to the human condition. There is a place for indicating the reasonableness of Christian morality, but in the final analysis the appeal is to Jesus' promise to share his Spirit with us.

There will always be a sense of sacred mystery about human life and human behaviour. One aim of education will be knowledge, as the Greek moralists said. But more important than knowledge of 'human nature' will be knowledge of Jesus and what he reveals to us about who God is and who we are called and graced to be.

Let us welcome the gift of his Spirit into our hearts. Sharing in his communion with God will purify our hearts. The fruit of his Spirit will be seen in our moral behaviour ('clean hands') as we are 'clothed in the Messiah', till we can say with Paul "I live no longer I. It is the Messiah who lives in me' (Galatians 2:19).

In the following presentation we will examine what Paul writes to the Colossians about how disciples of Jesus can and should live.