

Module: The New Testament

Session 32 – Christian Living in the New Testament

*“You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your mind.”
“Love your neighbour as yourself.” (Matthew 22:37, 39).*

The Christian message introduced profound changes in the world. Believers are not simply adherents of a religion, but a “new creation”. “... anyone who belongs to Christ has become a new person. The old life is gone; a new life has begun!” (2 Corinthians 5:17).

There is a clear distinction between the old and new:

“Don’t you realize that those who do wrong will not inherit the Kingdom of God? Don’t fool yourselves. Those who indulge in sexual sin, or who worship idols, or commit adultery, or are male prostitutes, or practice homosexuality, or are thieves, or greedy people, or drunkards, or are abusive, or cheat people - none of these will inherit the Kingdom of God. Some of you were once like that. But you were cleansed; you were made holy; you were made right with God by calling on the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.” (1 Corinthians 6:9-11)

This is total transformation. But, how are the followers/disciples of Jesus Christ to behave in this brand new world?

1. The example of the human life of Jesus Christ

Our model, as Christians, is Jesus Christ. He lived in another age, another culture, which were in many ways alien to our own. His attitudes and priorities were *informed* by his culture, its belief structures, its nuanced history and its relationship with other nations and cultures. However, it was *instructed* by His relationship with Father God.

Jesus was God, but He was man; he was man, but He was God. He intersected every day with a world community impacted by sin. He had physical and emotional needs, and was tempted by community values and pressured by social expectations. But He did not become like His world. He is our example, our life. As Christians, our minds are to be like His; then our lives will follow.

“Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ (Philippians 2:5).

Christian leaders are also to live in such a way that they can instruct, like Paul:

*“... you should imitate me, just as I imitate Christ. I am so glad that you always keep me in your thoughts, and that you are following the teachings I passed on to you”
(1 Corinthians 11:1, 2).*

2. From law and compliance to a new level

“You have heard that our ancestors were told But I say” (Matthew 5-7 “Sermon on the Mount”, various places).

Jesus did not abolish the standards of the old Law. He went much further; he taught that the source of our lives is not what we do externally, but what our hearts are like. He hated hypocrisy (ie professing one thing and living differently) on the part of the religious leaders; they had religion, but they had lost their relationship with God.

3. Transformation and victorious living; otherwise impossible

The Christian life is not about compliance but a transformational experience.

Some Christians attempt to escape the "pollutions" of the world by withdrawing. That never works, because we carry with us what we have been exposed to all of our lives. Not that this accumulation is necessarily wrong, but we are made in God's image, and something of the eternal resides in each of our hearts (Ecclesiastes 3:11).

“With the Lord’s authority I say this: Live no longer as the Gentiles do, for they are hopelessly confused. Their minds are full of darkness; they wander far from the life God gives because they have closed their minds and hardened their hearts against him. They have no sense of shame. They live for lustful pleasure and eagerly practice every kind of impurity. But that isn’t what you learned about Christ. Since you have heard about Jesus and have learned the truth that comes from him, throw off your old sinful nature and your former way of life, which is corrupted by lust and deception. Instead, let the Spirit renew your thoughts and attitudes. Put on your new nature, created to be like God—truly righteous and holy. So stop telling lies. Let us tell our neighbours the truth, for we are all parts of the same body. And “don’t sin by letting anger control you.” Don’t let the sun go down while you are still angry, for anger gives a foothold to the devil. If you are a thief, quit stealing. Instead, use your hands for good hard work, and then give generously to others in need. Don’t use foul or abusive language. Let everything you say be good and helpful, so that your words will be an encouragement to those who hear them. And do not bring sorrow to God’s Holy Spirit by the way you live. Remember, he has identified you as his own, guaranteeing that you will be saved on the day of redemption. Get rid of all bitterness, rage, anger, harsh words, and slander, as well as all types of evil behaviour. Instead, be kind to each other, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, just as God through Christ has forgiven you.” (Ephesians 4:17-32)

4. Living in a secular world with a Christian world view

When you look around you, your mind interprets what you see, using hard wiring and coding laid down over a long period. When you open your mouth your world view speaks. When you make a decision, you do so on the basis of your learned world view priorities. When you process what you see and hear every day, you do so through the filters and architecture of that world view.

Your ideology, thought patterns, values and assumptions are strongly informed by that world view. What you have devoured you have become. Your beliefs have assumptions embedded in them. What you believe shapes you.

Jesus described a lifestyle that was different, often at odds with the prevailing world system. Christians are to have a new world view. The Christian life is not just learning or even having (or "leaning on") human understanding. It is about relationship, with Jesus Christ, the Word who became flesh, developing intimacy with God, and seeing the world through His eyes.

There is a choice: the Bible says that if we love the world, the love of the father is not in us (1 John 2:15). If we love Christian doctrine (eg holiness) for its own sake this does not automatically mean that love of the Father is in us either; our motivation may be pride or religious dogmatism, reflecting tribal disagreements between Christian communities; simply part of the circus of competing ideas.

Scripture teaches that everyone without Christ is spiritually blinded (1 Corinthians 2:14; 2 Corinthians 4:4); they search, but lack understanding. It is easy to echo the language of the spirit of the age (1 Corinthians 2:12; Ephesians 2:2; 1 John 2:15-17).

A Christian world view involves looking at, and living in, the world from the viewpoint of Jesus Christ, as Lord of our lives and thinking. A Christian world view is not something we can "impose" on others, or even learn, because all the learning in the world will not equip us to meet new or difficult circumstances. A Christian world view is imparted spiritually; it is transformative because it is birthed in us by the Holy Spirit.

Christians live in the world, but are not separate from it. We encounter a wide range of world views every day, without even thinking about it. We are surrounded/bombarded by forces that seek to dominate our thinking, our attitudes, our belief systems, our allegiances - and assume that we will compliantly fall into line.

A Christian world view will touch on every aspect of life. It will help us live like Christ in our modern world. It will inevitably lead to conflict with other world views, because light and darkness cannot coexist in the same space.

A Christian world view is intensely personal, but it cannot ever become so subjective that "everyone does what is right in his own eyes". For too long the "church" has reflected social and economic pressures of "the age" - or done nothing, acquiesced or withdrawn.

A Christian world view is a radical approach to life, from the ground up. What we see often depends upon our viewpoint; however, it is equally arguable that that viewpoint can be in entirely the wrong place?

What motivates us? What creates our thinking? How do we decide what is right? How should we respond to external stimuli and pressures? How do Christians with different views of the world reconcile their beliefs/attitudes? Can there be more than one legitimate discourse? Can belief itself be questioned? Some find this threatening.

Can tradition be questioned (even jettisoned) without degrading Biblical faith? These are all important questions. Christ's disciples were all individuals, not regimented, but they all needed the Holy Spirit to reveal Christ and His way to them.

Christianity gives us purpose and identity. We are men and women, created in the image of God, God loves us, we are separated from Him because of sin, but Christ died for us, to bring us back into relationship with God, as a world, and as individuals. Each of us is unique, with names, personalities, abilities, strengths and weaknesses, talent and limits, and God has a plan for each of our lives. There is no religion in all the world that shows us this about our real identity. Only Christ makes us "complete". We are of infinite value to Him, not subject to some cosmic cost benefit analysis. Relationship with Him becomes the foundation for everything else.

5. Praxis

"All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness" (2 Timothy 3:16).

How do we live the life Jesus wants? What do we actually "do" with a Christian world view? This is the heart of Kingdom Living.

Where do we start? As you read through the teachings of Jesus, the lives of the first Christians and the epistles, certain patterns stand out. Numerous epistles begin with great doctrinal statements and finish with practical application. Both are essential and complementary. Without reproducing the entire text of the New Testament here, there are bundles of teaching that centre on how to operate as Christians in the home, church, work, society, in politics, economics and cultural settings:

- loving God and loving one another
- functioning in the Christian church
- marriage, parenting and family life
- morality/ethics
- money - poverty, wealth, simplicity and hospitality
- employment, industrial relations, paying taxes and using leisure
- submitting to civil authorities while being "heavenly minded"
- living "Christianly" in a multicultural society
- and much more

Lists such as these potentially hint at a new Law, a Christian re-codification of the old Mosaic Law, full of rules and prohibitions to observe. Some Christian movements take them as such and reduce Christianity to regulations and forms. However, nothing could be further than the truth. Paul describes (eg Galatians, Colossians) the folly of devising rules that exist for the purpose of compliance; they only lead to judgementalism, pride and elitism. The person who fails in one fails in all, by definition (see James 2:10). The emphasis is on external behaviour, not the state of the heart. This is *not* the Gospel.

Paul wrote, "So then, I myself in my mind am a slave to God's law." (Romans 7:25). For the Christian, the teachings in the epistles show us how God wants us to live.

Of course, it is only Christ in us and the power of the Holy Spirit who enables us to do those things which are pleasing to the Father. It is God who "works in us to will and to do what pleases Him." (Phil. 2:13) God not only gets all the credit for our justification, but for our sanctification as well.

So, do New Testament rules facilitate Christian living? Yes, but only after a person has been brought into a relationship with God by the power of the Holy Spirit through faith in Christ. Christians seek to do good not in order to be saved, but rather, because we have already been saved.

"So put to death the sinful, earthly things lurking within you. Have nothing to do with sexual immorality, impurity, lust, and evil desires. Don't be greedy, for a greedy person is an idolater, worshiping the things of this world. Because of these sins, the anger of God is coming. You used to do these things when your life was still part of this world. But now is the time to get rid of anger, rage, malicious behavior, slander, and dirty language. Don't lie to each other, for you have stripped off your old sinful nature and all its wicked deeds. Put on your new nature, and be renewed as you learn to know your Creator and become like him." (Colossians 3:5-11).

A New "Law" of Liberty

The Gospel introduces a new "Law of Liberty. It is not a law comprised of requirements and enforced by sanctions. Rather, it is a declaration of righteousness and salvation by Christ, an offer of peace and pardon, and a free promise of eternal life through Him. The juxtaposition of the two contradictory terms - "law" and "liberty" - makes the point, especially to legalists, that this was an entirely new way of thinking about both. Paul uses this same technique when he refers to the "law of faith" in Romans 3:27. Hearts that are redeemed by Christ and made new behave in new ways because they are the way they are now made. If we fail, we have forgiveness and restoration; as we grow in faith and relationship with Jesus Christ and the people of God, we are changed. This is the work of the Spirit. It is His power in us that gives us the ability to live in a way that pleases God (Galatians 5:13-16).

"Fix your thoughts on what is true, and honorable, and right, and pure, and lovely, and admirable. Think about things that are excellent and worthy of praise. Keep putting into practice all you learned and received from me - everything you heard from me and saw me doing. Then the God of peace will be with you." (Philippians 4:8, 9).

The teaching of Jesus and those who wrote the New Testament under Divine inspiration is intended to be experienced in our daily lives. With God's Spirit in us, and as members of His Church, we have a compass, a roadmap, an anchor for approaching, defining and explaining issues, and a way to position ourselves (our thinking, opinions, values, judgements and priorities) in relation to the rest of the world and our eternal destiny.