

BEING LIKE JESUS

During a great discourse with His disciples, Jesus urged them to: "seek ye *first* the kingdom of God and his righteousness" (Matthew 6:33). That invitation is for us today. Before any other interests, God invites us to make Him our priority. We are beckoned to become part of God's kingdom and discover the astonishing depth of His rightness. In the previous verse Jesus talked of the Gentiles *seeking to acquire* temporal security and now he contrasted that to another kind of *seeking, a relationship with God*. God wants us to experience Him, to crave His righteousness. This profound invitation, Jesus said, was to be our preeminent concern.

Why should man not study the theme of redemption? It is the greatest subject that can engage the human mind. If men would contemplate the love of Christ, displayed in the cross, their faith would be strengthened to appropriate the merits of his shed blood, and they would be cleansed and saved from sin.[1]

We are entreated to pursue and comprehend the great principles that form the foundation of God's kingdom. Within the perimeters of this flawless realm, we discern the wonders of His character and can appropriate His merits as if they were ours. If ye abide in me, and my words abide in you, ... (John 15:7) are Christ's words which describe the closeness He desires each of us to have with Him. He wants, with an intensity as deep as death itself, for us to truly experience Him.

Great misconceptions exist with God's people as to what it means to have faith, how God saves us and the conditions for eternal life. How do we really come to Jesus? What does it mean to be justified? If the thief on the cross simply affirmed Jesus as divine and was saved, is that all I need to do? Can God take man's sinful nature to heaven? Does faith cleanse my character? Questions and opinions are nearly limitless as to how we are saved. But there is only one real truth.

It is to this challenge that we begin this study. If coming to Jesus is so plain that everyone should understand it, why are there so many views? We must start with a prayerful hope that opinion and prejudice will not be a barrier to truth.

A bridge needs to be built over the chasm between the theology of righteousness and the practical steps we experience. We must grasp what provisions have been made for our salvation. Then, we need a clear understanding of how to experience Christ our Righteousness. In this discovery Jesus must be more than a historical figure, a religious name or a concept – He is to be seen as a transforming power to give us strength equal to every obstacle that would impede our restoration. Then far beyond that, we are invited to submit our very natures to His creative power. Then our characters will become like His.

What God is Faced With

The Scriptures give us a unique insight into the origin of man: "And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness" (Genesis 1:26). The very existence of man was at the pleasure of God. We are a by-product of a remarkable *decision* the divine heavenly Beings

made. In that decision they chose to make us in their likeness. "What is man, that thou art mindful of him? and the son of man, that thou visitest him? For thou hast made him a little lower than the angels, and hast crowned him with glory and honor" (Psalms 8:4-5).

Because our natures were God's idea and because we have a likeness to Him, we are especially important to Him. We can associate with Him. He actually wants us to be His friend! In that relationship God saw that there needed to be a unique dependency upon Him. "For as the Father hath life in himself; so hath he given to the Son to have life in himself" (John 5:26). That life within the self-sustaining Godhead was shared with man. Man was never made to have life within himself. God said of the forbidden tree: ... for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die. In that dependent relationship, the gift of life was preserved through obedience.

Because of man's sin many terrible consequences came. The life-sustaining relationship with heaven would cease to exist at some point. The loving loyal nature of man was altered. God was dethroned and self took the ascendancy. Communication with heaven was now placed on the basis of faith. The very existence of God was now understood on the basis of evidence. God would now communicate with men through *influences* on the heart.

Intriguingly, Satan corrupted the truth about man during his Eden temptation. He told Eve that life could be sustained apart from God's will. He convinced her of the importance of self. He elevated her imagination where she perceived herself enthroned as a god. This perversion of reality degraded mankind. It was so powerful, so all encompassing that the desires and tendencies of man's heart would be man-bent and not God-directed. The nature of man changed.

"And God saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually" (Genesis 6:5). In the first third of this earth's history, sin progressed to a point that man severed irrevocably his final offer to be connected with heaven. Only Noah and his immediate family were preserved.

The tragic turn in man's nature was so profound that Paul said the "carnal mind is enmity against God: for it is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be. So then they that are in the flesh cannot please God" (Romans 8:7-8). So marred had the nature of man become that we are told, "There is none righteous, no, not one: there is none that understandeth; there is none that seeketh after God. They are all gone out of the way, they are together become unprofitable; there is none that doeth good, no, not one" (Romans 3:10-12).

Since man is now a sinner by nature, death came to the human race. The life sustaining relationship that God originally gave to man was severed (Romans 5:12). This depravity is defined further in Jeremiah 17:9; Isaiah 1:6, 64:6; Romans 7:15-24, 1:21.

Man's inherited and innate nature has led to:

1. Having more interest in self than God
2. Severing his contact with Life
3. His thoughts being bent towards Satan

4. An actual hatred towards God
5. An inability to please God
6. A changed mind that cannot understand right
7. Being unable, by himself, to seek God
8. Wrong dominating the mind, will and body
9. The sentence of eternal death

He is so out of harmony with what sinless Adam was like, only a miraculous divine intervention could alter this course.

God's challenge: "Though God was hated, insulted, degraded and abused, we are told, God so loved the world" (John 3:16). This remarkable response to the terrible hatred of man is impossible to comprehend. Our spirit is retaliatory. God's response is tenderness. In fact, Ezekiel was told, "Say unto them, As I live, saith the Lord God, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked; but that the wicked turn from his way and live: turn ye, turn ye from your evil ways; for why will ye die, O house of Israel? (Ezekiel 33:11).

There lies an almost unbelievable invitation. God wants us back. He wants to be friends once again. He wants to be enthroned in our lives. But how? We are naturally against God. Through divine wisdom, a plan was made for us to be restored. It is complete, precise, yet simple. This is what God devised.

What God Did to Restore Man

Provisions were made for man's death sentence to be reversed through an expensive errand God sent Jesus on. God gave His divine Son to the whole world as a forever gift. Jesus accepted the challenge to show that a perfect relationship with God was possible and then He died for us. This death was a substitute death for every person that lived, was living and would ever live. He died for all (II Corinthians 5:15). "God spared not his own Son, but delivered him up for us all" (Romans 8:32).

God is too holy and His character too pure to trifle with sin. He could never save man with sin or in sin. *The possibility that something could occur to take away sin from man's heart was part of His all encompassing plan.*

Whatever God might do, He had to develop an avenue whereby man could have contact with restorative truth and then be able to rationally decide for it if he chose to. This meant that God would have to deal with our minds. Would this coerce our sinful nature against our will? Never! God always leaves the choice up to us.

God decided that, since man's nature is so corrupt and weakened, He would make sure that Satan did not enfeeble man's will in *every area*. God opted to sensitize man's conscience and endow his nature to *always* have the capability to embrace one thing – to be like Jesus if he chooses.

The power of choice *God has given to men*; it is their's to exercise. You cannot change your

heart, you cannot of yourself or give to God its affections; but you can choose to serve Him.[2]

There it is, another gift that God has provided for us.

Through utter dependency on sin, many have lost their ability to choose a life in opposition to years of wrong. They have become slaves to habits and behavior that they cannot break. But they can always choose Jesus. This opportunity comes by a special work of the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit does not work upon the human heart to compel you to give yourself to Christ, to force you to yield your conscience, but it shines into the chambers of the mind in a way to convict of sin, and to entice you unto righteousness.[3]

What gave God permission to influence men's minds in this way? Jesus' life and death. His blood bought the right to reclaim us as His! Jesus showed the universe that there was no excuse for sin. Because of this He opens the door to give every person the chance to be restored back to His likeness. This is called reconciliation. Because of Jesus we have a *way of escape*. There hath no temptation taken you but such as is common to man: "but God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able; but will with the temptation also make a way to escape, that ye may be able to bear it" (I Corinthians 10:13).

The very first thing God does is to convict us of a better way. Then He gives enough power to help us make a true moral choice.

Christ suffered the penalty of the law, which was death, in order to give to man another trial, to provide for him another probation, and allot to him another opportunity of proving loyal to the authority of God.[4]

This is the gospel story. It is the story of how man can become once again like Jesus. We stand before the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. We are on probation just like Adam and Eve were.

"For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for it is the *power of God unto salvation* to everyone that believeth; to the Jew first, and also to the Greek, for therein is the righteousness of God revealed from faith to faith: as it is written; the just shall live by faith" (Romans 1:16;17). Isn't that wonderful? We can be saved through the power of that gospel.

Paul goes on, however, to make sure everyone knows that God cannot tolerate sin: "For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who hold the truth in unrighteousness" (vs 18).

We must somehow find a way to understand how to use His plan of redemption. This cannot occur until we know that Jesus is "the Lamb of God which taketh away the sin of the world" (John 1:29). It is Him and Him alone that brings to us salvation, redemption and eternal life.

But what must I do to accept His offer? Herein lies the question whereby millions will be lost or saved. How is it answered?

Step One

Look to Jesus as a friend who can help your faith.

"Him that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out" (John 6:37). We can come to Him in prayer and in His word. As we approach Him we are invited to "Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world" (John 1:29).

We can heed this invitation and come to Him just as we are: "Come unto Me all ye that labor and are heavy laden and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28).

If you see your sinfulness, do not wait to make yourself better. How many there are who think they are not good enough to come to Christ. Do you expect to become better through your own efforts? "Can the Ethiopian change his skin, or the leopard his spots? then may ye also do good, that are accustomed to do evil" (Jeremiah 13:23). "There is help for us only in God. We must not wait for stronger persuasions, for better opportunities, or for holier tempers. We can *do nothing* of ourselves. We must come to Christ just as we are."^[5]

We *exercise* faith as we choose to make contact with Jesus. We *exercise* faith as our attraction towards Him grows. We *exercise* faith as we seek to be like Him.

"All that we may, we cannot pay a ransom for our souls, We can do nothing to originate faith, *for faith is the gift of God*; neither can we perfect it, for Christ is the finisher of our faith. It is all of Christ."^[6]

God's Spirit instills in us an interest in Jesus. That's the gift of faith. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith ... Hebrews 12:2 (NIV). It may be nothing more than a yearning for something better. But that unsatisfied desire leads us to reach out to search for an answer. That is exercising the faith His Spirit has given to us. As we behold Jesus and we sense our longings can be filled through Him, we have taken that beautiful step of faith.

As we are convicted that there is something special about Jesus, we will want to talk with Him, to learn more about Him and to tell others of Him. This faith (really our use of the gift of faith) is watched by heaven very closely. It becomes a measure, a thermometer, of how our relationship with heaven is.

"Angels of God who minister unto those who shall be heirs of salvation are acquainted with the condition of all and understand just the measure of faith possessed by each individual. The unbelief, pride, covetousness, and love of the world, which have existed in the hearts of God's professed people, have grieved the sinless angels."^[7]

As we exercise, mature and nurture this gift of faith, the attributes of Jesus replace, little by little, our pride, covetousness and love of the world. "But we all, with open face beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord, are changed into the same image from glory to glory, even as by the Spirit of the Lord" (II Corinthians 3:18).

Faith becomes a living, growing power within our mind. It reaches out in ever widening discovery at the beauty and merits of Jesus.

To talk of religion in a casual way, to pray without soul hunger and living faith, avails nothing. A nominal faith in Christ, which accepts Him merely as the Saviour of the world, can never bring healing to the soul. The faith that is unto salvation is not a mere intellectual assent to the truth. He who waits for entire knowledge before he will exercise faith cannot receive blessing from God. It is not enough to believe *about* Christ; we must believe *in* Him as a personal Saviour; which appropriates His merits to ourselves. Many hold faith as an opinion. Saving faith is a transaction by which those who receive Christ join themselves in covenant relation with God. Genuine faith is life. A living faith means an increase of vigor, a confiding trust by which the soul becomes a conquering power.[8]

Genuine faith is a power given to us to learn more and more about Jesus, and as each discovery is made we long to be like Him. Jesus embodied the fullness of this truth in an answer to a question Thomas asked Him, "How can we know the way" (John 14:5). Then Jesus with firm yet loving words told Thomas and all the world, "I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the father, but by me" (John 14:6). Jesus would forever be the only redemptive focus of mankind. And He would always be available to any soul reaching out to Him. No man, no church, no works of rightness would bring us life. Only a personal decision to come to Jesus activates those wondrous promises.

There is an associated step we take as He comes more clearly into view.

There are thousands who believe in the gospel and in Jesus Christ as the world's Redeemer, *but they are not saved by that faith*. This is only an assent of their judgment to that which is a fact, but it does not transform the character. *They do not repent and have that faith that lays hold upon Christ as their sin-pardoning Saviour; their belief is not unto repentance*. There must be a faith that accomplishes its work for the receiver, a faith in the atoning sacrifice, a faith that works by love and purifies the soul.[9]

If my faith does not crave to be like the One I have faith in, it cannot be a saving faith.

Step Two

Address the sin in your life so He can help you repent.

Naked faith is nothing more than proud belief. It never bonds with the eternal throne. It desires and expects everything and cooperates with nothing. Only when faith reaches out to imitate its object will heavenly power come to strengthen.

"Many think that repentance is a work which devolves wholly upon man, but this is an error. The Bible does not teach that man must repent before he comes to Christ. Repentance must precede forgiveness; but the sinner does not repent till he has faith in Christ as his mediator. Christ is the author and finisher of our faith. His love, shining from the cross, speaks eloquently of the sufferings of the only-begotten Son of God for fallen man. This love draws sinners to Him. The transgressor may resist this love; he may refuse to be drawn to Christ; but if he does

not resist, he will be led to the foot of the cross, in repentance for the sins that caused the death of the Son of God."[10]

"Then what is the work before the sinner? It is to exercise repentance *toward* God, and faith *toward* our Lord Jesus Christ. In his precious blood the stains of sin may all be washed away."[11]

This thought is so special. We not only have faith in Jesus as a friend and a divine leader, we look to our heavenly Father and confess and repent of our sins. Why? Because if we want to really be like Jesus, we must ask for cleansing of our hearts. It is a request made to God to forgive our sins. John tells us, "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us of our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (I John 1:9).

Isn't that marvelous? That's what we want. If we can get sin out of our lives, He can come into our hearts and start a restoration project that He promises will be done on time if we let Him.

Here is an important thought to study: "The Children of God should cultivate a keen sensitiveness to sin. Here, as well as elsewhere, we should not despise the day of small things. It is one of Satan's most successful devices, to lead men to the commission of little sins, to blind the mind to the danger of little indulgences, little digressions from the plainly stated requirements of God. Many who would shrink with horror from some great transgression, are led to look upon sin in little matters as of trifling consequence. But these little sins eat out the life of godliness in the soul. The feet which enter upon a path diverging from the right way are tending toward the broad road that ends in death. When once a retrograde movement begins, no one can tell where it may end."[12]

When we recognize the wonders of Jesus and we sense the terrible nature of sin, God's Spirit comes to us to give us special power to continue that journey towards the cross of Christ.

"The time is not far off now when men will want a much closer relation to Christ, a much closer union with his Holy Spirit than [they] ever have had."[13]

That's what I want. I hope you do too. As you study this article, I hope Jesus becomes more important to you. I hope that you even crave to be like Him, that He becomes more important than any pleasure, idol or sin in this world, that a beautiful vision of Jesus has been caught, and we have been so thrilled that we ask God to cleanse our heart of sin. Now a very special thing happens in heaven. Your decision leads God to make an executive order.

"Righteousness is obedience to the law. The law demands righteousness, and this the sinner owes to the law; but he is incapable of rendering it. The only way in which he can attain to righteousness is through faith. By faith he can bring to God the merits of Christ, and the Lord [God] places the obedience of His Son to the sinners account. Christ's righteousness is accepted in place of man's failure, and God receives, pardons, justifies, the *repentant believing soul*, treats him as though he were righteous, and loves him as He loves His Son. This is how faith is accounted for righteousness."[14]

Many err in this step. If I have faith but fail to deal with my past sin, Christ's mantle of righteousness cannot cover me. When I confess I still have a sinful nature, but all past wrongs have been forgiven.

"Every soul may say: 'By His perfect obedience He has satisfied the claims of the law, and my only hope is found in looking to Him as my substitute and surety, *who obeyed the law perfectly for me [!]...* He clothes me with His righteousness, which answers all the demands of the law. *I am complete in Him who brings in everlasting righteousness.* He presents me to God in the spotless garment of which no thread was woven by any human agent. All is of Christ, and all the glory, honor, and majesty are to be given to the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sins of the world."[15]

That is amazing! In these two simple steps, God identifies so closely with us that He permits that incredibly perfect life of Jesus to be credited to our characters. God is so excited about this friendship He goes all out to try to make sure it will never end.

The question again arises: Can we be justified and saved without repentance? "He that covereth his sins shall not prosper: but whoso confesseth and forsaketh them shall have mercy" (Proverbs 28:13). "Seek ye the Lord while he may be found, call ye upon him while he is near: Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts: and let him return unto the Lord, and he will have mercy upon him; and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon" (Isaiah 55: 6-8). When Paul addressed the elders at Ephesus, he testified that the key issues of the gospel was repentance towards God and faith towards Jesus Christ (Acts 20:20, 21, 24, 27).

God gives to us the gift of repentance, just like faith comes as a blessing from heaven. We exercise this gift by confession of past sins and then turning away from all sin. It is then that God activates pardon, and our sins are forgiven.

"There is no salvation without repentance. No impenitent sinner can believe with his heart unto righteousness, Repentance is described by Paul as a godly sorrow for "sin that worketh repentance to salvation not to be repented of" (2 Corinthians 7:10). This repentance has in it nothing of the nature of merit, but it prepares the heart for the acceptance of Christ as the only Saviour, the only hope of the lost sinner."[16]

"Repentance cannot be experienced without Christ; for *it is the repentance of which he is the author that is the ground upon which we may apply for pardon.* It is through the work of the Holy Spirit that men are led to repentance. It is from Christ that the grace of contrition comes, as well as the gift of pardon, and repentance as well as forgiveness of sins is procured only through the atoning blood of Christ. Those whom God pardons he first makes penitent."[17]

Lest we are tempted to minimize **Step Two**, let's closely look at this eternal thought: "No one need look upon the sin against the Holy Ghost as something mysterious and indefinable. The sin against the Holy Ghost is the sin of persistent refusal to respond to the invitation to repent."[18]

References (Emphases added unless otherwise noted):

- [1] The Signs of the Times, 12/30/1880, "What was Secured by the Death of Christ."
- [2] Steps to Christ, p. 47.
- [3] The Youth's Instructor, 8/01/95, Delay No Longer.
- [4] The Signs of the Times, 09/24/94, Tested by the Law.
- [5] Steps to Christ, p. 31.
- [6] White, Ellen G.; *Bible Echo*, 05/15/92, Poor in Spirit
- [7] Testimonies, vol. 2, p. 125.
- [8] The Desire of Ages, p. 347.
- [9] Manuscript Release 8, p. 356.
- [10] *The Signs of the Times*, 03/18/1903.
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- [12] White, Ellen G.; *The Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, vol. 2, p. 1017.
- [13] The Ellen G. White 1888 Materials, p. 1250.
- [14] Selected Messages, book 1, p. 367.
- [15] *Ibid.*, p. 396.
- [16] Faith and Works, p. 99.
- [17] The Youth's Instructor, 12/06/94, Words for the Young.
- [18] Advent Review and Sabbath Herald, 06/29/97, "Peril of Sinning Against Light."