

What Does God Want Me To Do?

The great crowd of 5000 people had been fed just the day before and some of them were still following Jesus around, but he questioned their motives: “You’re just following me because I fed you, not because you can see God at work. Don’t concentrate on natural food, but on the food which gives you eternal life – that’s what I want to give you.” (*John 6:26,27* – paraphrased!)

“What should we do, then, to do what God wants us to do?” “This is the work for you to do: put your trust in the one God has sent.” (*v.28,29*)

What did they think Jesus would say? Were they expecting a long list of rules, like the ones the Pharisees and religious experts gave them? Or did they really want to obey God, and would follow what Jesus said? If we read on, there seem to have been **some** genuine seekers there.

What about us? Maybe we have found real forgiveness and new birth through personal faith in the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus, but do we think that living as a Christian means following a pattern, a set of rules? Like the folks in *John 6*, at least we have a desire to please God, but how can we do it?

Having experienced the great grace of God, we naturally want to **do** something in gratitude. We read in the Bible about how different life is for a believer. If we look around at fellow believers, we can see ways in which they seem to be living the Christian life – at least better than **we** are! Speakers and writers continue to tell us how we are supposed to live as Christians.

It all adds up to a very long list of expectations:– things we think other Christians expect us to do, things that we have read, sermons we have heard, what we think God expects of us and what we expect of ourselves. It is all too easy to go on adding to the list. Any change in our understanding of what the Christian life is supposed to be can bring with it a fresh set of expectations!

The longer the list, the more depressing it grows! We fail to clear even some of the lowest hurdles, and failure brings with it a sense of worthlessness and condemnation. All the expectations seem to queue up to accuse us of failure! We may begin to wonder if it’s all worth it.

There is a way out!

The first part of the solution is to take hold again of the grace of God to us in the Lord Jesus. Just as we experienced forgiveness when we first put our trust in him, we need to discover afresh that there is forgiveness when

we confess our failure, as soon as we agree with our Father's diagnosis that we have missed the target, and take hold again of the power of the blood of Jesus. (**1 John 1:5-10**) Experiencing ongoing forgiveness like this is a vital part of living in Jesus.

The second part of the solution is also part of the grace of God to us in Jesus, but in a way that we may not have realised before. All those expectations that we have been trying to live up to (whether they are from other Christians, invented by us or from God himself) have no more place in our lives. They are just not relevant to us any more!

When the Lord Jesus died on the cross, he paid the price for all the sin and failure in our lives. If we have put our trust in him for that, we will have experienced the forgiveness that comes as a result. Our faith didn't do it, God did it, but he needed our faith to co-operate with his power.

It's a bit like the ignition switch in your car. You turn the key and the starter motor turns the engine over. If the large current which the starter motor takes were to go through the ignition switch, it would burn it out very quickly – it just couldn't handle it. So a small current from the ignition switch goes to a servo (a much 'beefier' switch) and turns it on, sending the power surge to the starter motor. Our faith can't produce forgiveness; that would be too much for us to handle. But our Father uses the tiny 'current' of our faith to trigger our experience of his grace to us. (See **Ephesians 2:8,9**)

What we may not have seen is that Jesus' death did much more. When he died on the cross, he also took with him all the laws, rules and regulations which accuse us of failure. Try reading **Colossians 2:6-23**. Paul says that our acts of disobedience are forgiven, and that 'the written code', the 'certificate of debt' (the list of all the things we **ought** to have done, but haven't) has been cancelled and nailed to the cross with Jesus – he has taken it out of the way! (**v.13,14**) All the accusation has been silenced.

As a result of that, Paul says, we do not need to live under any set of regulations, any list of 'dos and don'ts'. As we have died to all that through the death of Jesus, why go on living that way? As he says, it may look good, may even look like good religious practice, but it is totally ineffective and doesn't make any impact to purify our lives. (**v.16-23**)

We may not have realised that we have died with Jesus! On the other hand, we probably know what **2 Corinthians 5:17** says: "*If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; **the old has gone, the new has come!***" The older translations say 'passed away' instead of 'gone' – maybe there's a clue there! This is not a new rule or 'expectation' – it doesn't say that if we are in Christ the old life should have gone, it says it has gone!

Being dead to the power of the law is only one part of what is ours in the Lord Jesus, but it is a powerful truth. We may have felt that we were doomed to spend the rest of our lives trying to measure up to God's exacting standards and continuously failing in the attempt. He has set us free from 'living from the outside' so that we can learn to live from the inside, from the new life of the Holy Spirit within.

"But I don't feel very free" we may say. Picture a man in prison for a crime he definitely did commit. He deserves to be there, held there by the law which he has broken. Then he is pardoned. The official document of pardon is brought into his cell and shown to him. The cell door is left open and the prison governor tells him he is free to go. But the man stays there, sitting in his cell. Is he free? Yes and no! He *is* actually free, but he has no experience of freedom. Why? Because he has not trusted the document that he has been shown and the words which have been said to him. He needs to act on what he has been told and put it to the test. I don't need to spell out how this applies to us, do I?

So if we have been set free from living by rules and regulations, how are we going to live now? It sounds great, but is it perhaps a little dangerous? Are we to throw off all restraint and live lawless lives?

In **Romans 7:6**, Paul gives us the answer. Yes, he says, we have been made to die to the law through the death of Christ, in order to be joined to Christ's own resurrection life. As he says, we now serve God "*in the new way of the Spirit and not in the old way of the written code*" (i.e. rules). We are set free, not to rebel but to serve from the heart.

This 'resurrection life' is for *now*, not for when Jesus comes back and we are made alive again. It is the life of the Holy Spirit in us, gradually changing us towards becoming more like Jesus. Not rules, but new life from the Holy Spirit inside us! This is part of our inheritance in Jesus, something that our Father has already given to us. As we see this, we can begin to take hold of it and see the results working out in our ordinary daily lives. "*For it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose.*" (**Philippians 2:13**)

Probably most of us experienced this new life springing up from inside us when we first trusted the Lord Jesus. What changed? Maybe failure seemed to be never-ending and we became weary. More likely, we just didn't know that our Father had made such complete provision for us.

Not simply forgiveness every time we confess sin, but also a growing awareness that the old life really **is** dead, and that the Holy Spirit actually **does** live in us and is changing us. Not because we follow a set of rules or a pattern, but because we are learning to take hold of what God has already done for us.

We often talk about having a relationship with God. It will not develop by following rules but it certainly will as we allow the Holy Spirit to go on showing us more of what it means to have our lives joined to the life of Jesus, and then learn to stand in faith in what he has shown us. This is, after all, what the Lord Jesus said the Holy Spirit would do! (**John 16: 12-15**) (See also **1 Corinthians 2:9-13**).

What about all the commands that we find in the New Testament? Are we to ignore them? Surely not, but equally we are not to be bound by them. Someone has wisely said that all the commands in the New Testament are addressed to the new life of the Holy Spirit within the believer. That's the only way we can fulfil them! If we have tried obeying them ourselves, we know from experience how we get dragged down into slavish legalism. The more 'right' the teaching, the greater tendency we seem to have to bind ourselves with rules.

We have been set free in Jesus! *"Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life has set you free from the law of sin and death"* (**Romans 8:1,2**).

How can we live this way? Back to **Colossians 2** ! In **v.6-7**, Paul encourages the believers to 'walk' (i.e. live their lives) in the Lord Jesus Christ, in the same way that they received him. How was that? How was it for us?

We heard the message. The truth began to sink in. We responded, maybe with only a little flicker of faith, and found that God was 'there'. For many of us, that first experience was one of forgiveness – precious indeed!

Paul says that we need to go on living the same way. He fills this letter and the others with precious facts about what God has done for us in Jesus, and encourages us to trust those facts. Faith comes by hearing what God says! (**Romans 10:6-17**)

We can't live this way without the work of the Holy Spirit. Living by laws is something we do on our own. Living by the law of the Spirit of life depends on the work of the Holy Spirit. He reveals to us more of our inheritance in Christ, we respond to what he shows us, and he enables us to live a life that is being changed from the inside. (**Romans 12:1,2**)

"Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!" (**2 Corinthians 9:15**)

Dave Taylor

January 2009

Further copies can be downloaded from www.justonecandle.uk