

Part 3

Life in the Father and Son

Chapter 9

Being the Light

You are the light of the world; a city set on a hill cannot be hidden.

Matthew 5:14

No one, having lit a lamp, puts it in a secret place
or under a basket, but on a lampstand,
so that those who come in might see the light.
Take heed, then, lest the light in you become darkness.

Luke 11:33, 35

Relationships

David wrote, “All that Jehovah pleased, He did in heaven, and on earth, in the seas, and all deep places” (Ps. 135:6). And according to Paul, we can learn much about God by paying attention to what He was pleased to do: “From the creation of the world, His invisible attributes (namely, His eternal power and divine nature) are clearly seen, being understood through the things that are made” (Rom. 1:20a). Seeing, then, that we may learn about God from what He did in creation, what does it tell us about God that the first thing He created was someone to love – the Son? If in creation, God did only and exactly what He wanted to do, as David said, then His creation of a Son *before anything else* must mean that God wanted most of all to have someone with Him, someone with whom to share His kind of life.

God could have created everything without a Son, of course, but what can we learn from the fact that He did not want to do that? Instead, He created a Son as “the reflection of His glory and the exact representation of His being” (Heb. 1:3), giving him the power to create whatever else the Father wanted. The author of

Hebrews said that it was through the Son that God created the universe (Heb. 1:2), and John wrote of the Son that “all things were created through him, and without him was nothing created that was created” (Jn. 1:3).

The importance of that revelation can hardly be overemphasized. It is fundamental to the Faith that God is, first of all, a God of relationships. In the beginning, the Son was there with the Father, not as an idea but as a dearly loved being, and that fact teaches us that before the beginning, God desired a loving relationship, and that holy desire lies at the heart of everything God has ever done. Nothing in creation contradicts that truth, and nothing confirms it so conclusively as does God’s choice to begin creation by creating someone to love, and then loving that person so much that He made him Lord of all and “most blessed forever” (Acts 10:36; Ps. 21:6).

Love

When John wrote, “God is love”, he put into words the meaning of God’s choice to create a beloved Son before anything else. To say that God is love is only another way of saying that God is a God of relationships, for love always has an object. Actually, John’s powerful, simple statement, “God is love”, seems like an understatement when God’s love is experienced and understood. John himself was overwhelmed by the holy love of God revealed in Christ Jesus:

1John 4

7. Beloved, let us love one another, for love is of God, and everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God.
8. He who does not love does not know God, for God is love.
9. By this was the love of God made manifest among us, that God sent His only Son into the world, that we might live through him.
10. In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son as the propitiation for our sins.

11. Beloved, if God loved us like this, we also should love one another.
12. No one has ever seen God. If we love one another, God abides in us, and His love is perfected in us.

I could go on, as John did, but the point is made. In his first epistle, John used the word “love” or one of its forms fifty times, which means that John used “love” about every other verse in that book. John fully understood what the pre-existence of the Son reveals about God, stressing to his readers that they should walk in love because he understood that to be like God, we must live as God does, that is, live in a way that makes for wholesome, loving relationships. God’s love motivates us to take care of each other’s heart, “regarding one another as more important than yourselves” (Phip. 2:3b).

The Ten Commandments

Every commandment, story, prophecy, and wise saying in the Bible was designed by God for the one purpose of leading us into right relationships with one another and with Him. Not one sentence in the Bible was written merely to entertain or inform. If people had not fallen into sin and ruined their relationship with God and with one another, there would be no need for a Bible. But we did fall, and to whichever page in the Bible we turn, we find guidance from God that will lead us toward the holiness of right relationships.

The first four of the Ten Commandments direct us toward a right relationship with God, the first and most important of them being that we are to have no other god besides God. The remaining six commandments direct us toward a right relationship with one another. Stealing, for example, is not the way to have a right relationship with one’s neighbor. Stealing hurts people, and so, God said, “You shall not steal.” Likewise, such deeds as adultery and murder ruin relationships, and so, God forbade them. The sins forbidden in the Ten Commandments are so contrary to good relationships that people in virtually every culture who are concerned for the well-being of others agree that those deeds are evil.

The Greatest Commandment

Once, a crafty expert in the law of Moses attempted to engage Jesus in a theological debate. When he asked Jesus which of God's commandments was the greatest,

Matthew 22

37. Jesus said to him, "You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.

38. This is the first and great commandment."

Then Jesus volunteered some additional information:

39. "But the second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'

40. On these two commandments hang the whole law and the prophets."

So, all the commandments of God, according to Jesus, are summed up by this: "Love God completely, and love your neighbor as you love yourself." That answer left the crafty expert speechless. He had not wanted the answer; he wanted a philosophical debate.

The apostle Paul agreed with Jesus; he wrote, "Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfillment of the law" (Rom. 13:10). But love is the fulfillment of the law only because the law came from a loving God. To put Paul's thought into modern terms, one might say, "Love does not hurt people; therefore, love is what God's law was all about." Had God been, above all else, a God of power, then the exercise of authority over others would have fulfilled His law instead of love. Or had He been most of all a God of wisdom, becoming a philosopher would have fulfilled the law. Or if He was a God of splendor, then spectacular architecture would have fulfilled the law. But because God is a God of relationships, love is what fulfills the law. It is only because God is "the God of peace" (Rom. 15:33; Heb. 13:20) that

peacemakers are blessed (Mt. 5:9). If God were a God of strife, peacemakers would be cursed instead.

Occasionally, Jesus would find an elder in Israel who sensed what was truly important:

Mark 12

28. When one of the scribes drew near and heard them reasoning together, seeing that Jesus answered them well, he put a question to him, “What is the first commandment of all?”
29. Jesus answered him, “The first of all the commandments is, ‘Hear, O Israel! The LORD is our God. The LORD is the only one!
30. And you shall love the LORD your God with all of your heart, and with all of your soul, and all of your mind, and with all of your strength.’ This is the first commandment.
31. And the second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.”
32. And the scribe said to him, “Well said, Teacher! You have spoken truthfully, for there is one God, and there is no other but He,
33. and to love Him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the soul, and with all the strength, and to love a neighbor as oneself is more than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices.”
- 34a. And when Jesus saw that he had answered with discretion, he said to him, “You are not far from the kingdom of God.”

No one is far from the heart of God who considers people to be more important than things.

Defining Sin and Righteousness

It will help illuminate the mind of Christ on this issue if we define sin as “wrong relationships”, for all unrighteousness expresses itself in some attitude or action that undermines right relationships. Righteousness, on the other hand, always contributes to right rela-

tionships. But we must not be fooled by the world's definitions of right and wrong. Even among God's people, there are "those who call evil good, and good evil; who put forth darkness for light, and light for darkness; who put forth bitter for sweet, and sweet for bitter" (cf. Isa. 5:20). Jesus never sinned, and yet, many hated him and considered him to be evil.

In a world like this, it is impossible for even the most upright of God's children to enjoy peaceful relationships with everybody; however, anyone who is like God strives for good relationships, just as He does. Multitudes in this world don't have peace and don't want it, but wise children of God live so that they have a peaceful relationship with whoever does want it (cf. Rom. 12:18). Walking in God's kind of life, faithful children of God "follow after things that make for peace, and the things that make for the edification of one another" (Rom. 14:19). As much as we wish it were not so, it is not possible to safely trust everybody in this world; in Christ, however, it is possible to be the kind of person everybody else can trust.

If everyone around you lived the way you are living, would they be free of sin and happy in the love of God? The Son of God surrendered himself on the cross of Calvary so that he would not be the only one able to answer yes. When the Father and the Son enter into our hearts by the Spirit, their holiness and strength empower us to live so that if any of our relationships are bad, they are not bad because of anything we are doing.

The Only Way

In the Old Testament, God's true ministers cried out for God's people to heed the law of Moses, stressing to them that living by the law was the only acceptable way for them to serve God. In this covenant, God's true ministers cry out for God's people to heed the Spirit, stressing to them that living by the Spirit is now the only acceptable way to serve God. The law provided Israel's only access to God, and every true man of God of those days taught that. Now, the Spirit is the only access to God (Eph. 2:18), and every true man of God today teaches that.

Moses and the prophets emphasized to God's people that the law was their life (Dt. 32:46–47), and everyone in Israel who be-

lied Moses and relied on the law to guide them pleased God and will live forever. Likewise, Jesus and the apostles emphasized to God's people that the Spirit is their life (Jn. 6:63; cf. Rom. 8:10), and everyone who believes what they taught relies on the Spirit to guide them, and they, too, please God and will live forever.

The Greatest Testimony

As good as any individual's fellowship with God may be, it cannot compare to the beauty of a group who live together in harmony with Him. The greatest testimony about Jesus that God's people can offer the world is to walk together in the light of God's life, that is, to enjoy as a unified body a right relationship with God and His Son, and with one another (Jn. 13:34–35). On the other hand, the worst testimony about Jesus that God's people can offer the world is to be divided, as they are now, by conflicting doctrines and traditions. The lack of unity among believers, the absence of fellowship in the Spirit, darkens their light and prevents the body of Christ on earth from being the saving witness that it could be. Note that John emphasized the community, not the individual, in the following exhortation:

1John 1

7. If we [not "I"] walk in the light as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and [if we have fellowship,] the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin.

This is a humbling truth. The body of Christ may be cleansed from all sin only if the members of the body have a right relationship – fellowship in Christ – with one another. Only where fellowship in the Spirit exists can there be God's kind of government among believers, and only where God's government is in force can there be peace. And only where peace reigns can children of God learn and grow in true holiness. Fellowship in the light of God affords extraordinary blessings and is greatly to be desired.

Jesus' last prayer before he withdrew to the garden of Gethsemane was a plea for the Father to grant unity to those who believed in him. Knowing the benefits that would come to a united

body, and knowing how effective the testimony of a united body would be to the world, Jesus prayed fervently for us to have it:

John 17

20. I am not asking for these alone [his disciples], but also for those who believe in me through their word,
21. that they all might be one,¹³³ just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they may also be one in us, so that the world might believe that you sent me.
22. And the glory that you have given me, I have given to them, that they might be one, just as we are one:
23. I in them, and you in me, so that they might be perfected in unity, and so that the world may know that you sent me and have loved them just as you loved me.

When Jesus prayed that prayer, he knew that he was about to die, and for him to take time out of his last few hours to plead with the Father to grant us fellowship with one another tells us that our unity was of paramount importance to him. I believe that it still is.

The Light of the World

It is true that Jesus said, “I am the light of the world,” but to quote only that part of what he said is to misrepresent the point he was making. What Jesus said was, “As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world” (Jn. 9:5). So, inasmuch as Jesus is no longer here in the world, he is no longer the light of the world. It is a mistake for believers to point to heaven and declare to sinners that the light of the world is up there. If we could see him, Jesus would be pointing back at us, saying, “I’ve had my turn; now, it is yours.” To sinners, a distant, invisible being in heaven is no more than an abstract idea, and ideas provide no deliverance from sin and no hope for salvation.

Since the day Jesus’ followers received God’s kind of life, God has had other sons besides Jesus to be lights in this world, for it is God’s life that is the light of the world, not the fleshly body in

¹³³ This Greek word “one” is not personal. Jesus was not praying that the disciples would become one person, but one in heart and purpose, just as he and the Father were one.

which it dwells, as John even said about Jesus: “In him was life, and the life was the light of men” (Jn. 1:4). When Jesus ascended into heaven, that light of men left Earth with him; there was no light of God’s life remaining in this world because nobody on Earth had it. But on Pentecost morning, the light returned! For God poured out His life on believers, just as Jesus had promised, saying, “He who follows me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life” (Jn. 8:12). In this covenant, either the light of God’s life is shining through us who have received it, or this world has no light. People must see the light, not just hear about it, and they can see it only in someone who is here with them. Neither the Bible nor Jesus is the light of the world – the Bible, because it is a thing, and Jesus, because he is not here.

Paul exhorted the saints to follow him as a faithful servant of God (Phip. 3:17; cf. Heb. 13:7). He could have told them to follow Jesus, but in order for them to do that, they would have had to build another tower of Babel to try to get up to where Jesus is so that they could see him. Christ did not send Paul to tell people to follow a light they could not see. That is not the gospel. Christ expects his ministers, and all His children, to be lights so that people may have something to follow. The Spirit’s light, shining through God’s children, can save people from yielding to the temptation to try to make their own way to heaven. In ancient times, men built a physical tower to reach heaven; in modern times, men devise spiritual towers to get there, that is, “commandments and doctrines of men” (Col. 2:22) which produce religious sects. But they are all as vain as was the tower of Babel.

Being the Truth

A messenger from God cannot be separated from the message he brings. When false teachers won the hearts of Paul’s converts in the ancient Roman province of Asia, the grieving apostle did not tell young Timothy, “All they in Asia have forsaken the truth.” Instead, the aged man of God said, “All they in Asia have forsaken me” (2Tim. 1:15). Jesus bore witness to the truth (Jn. 18:37), and he was the truth (Jn. 14:6). The apostles likewise bore witness to the truth, and they were the truth to their generation. God’s ser-

vants are called to *be* His message to the world more than they are called to speak it.

If a minister is not, himself, the light, then he is spreading darkness wherever he goes, no matter what he does; and if he is not, himself, the truth, he is lying, no matter what he says. When demons proclaimed that Jesus was the “holy one of God” or “Son of God” (Mk. 1:24; Mt. 8:29), Jesus commanded them to be silent, and then he cast them out (Mk. 1:25). It was not because they were making false statements that Jesus commanded them to be silent. Every statement in the Bible that demons made about Jesus was factually true, but *the demons themselves* were not the truth, and God hates for those who are not the truth to speak even true things about Him: “To the wicked man, God says, ‘How dare you declare my statutes, or take up my covenant into your mouth!’” (Ps. 50:16).

Satan quoted from the Bible during the Temptation, but the holy verses he quoted became lies when he spoke them because he is a liar. Men without the Spirit, likewise, can quote the Bible, and often do, but never rightly, even if they think they are doing good. As we mentioned earlier, Satan thought he was doing good in the Temptation of Jesus. In every case, it is not what one thinks about himself but his spiritual condition which determines the value of what he does. In the hands of those without the light of God’s life, the Scriptures cannot be rightly used. It has been proved a thousand times over that in the hands of ungodly men, the holy Bible is transformed into a tool of deceit. Without the Spirit, Paul said, no man belongs to God (Rom. 8:9b), and if a man does not belong to God, He cannot rightly use what comes from God.

The Bible needed to be written, but it is only ink and paper. The Bible is “flesh”, that is, a physical thing. It is precious, and God uses it just as He used the law of Moses; nevertheless, whatever is fleshly is contrary to the Spirit (Gal. 5:17). Paul was referring to the Bible, not to pagan writings, when he said, “The letter kills, but the Spirit gives life” (2Cor. 3:6), and Jesus warned his adversaries that they were foolish to trust the Scriptures to save them. The Scriptures, he told them, point to him, but they did not believe him and would not come to him for the kind of life they needed (Jn. 5:39–40).