

“Mirroring The First-Century Church”

1 Kings 2:10-12; 3:3-14

Psalm 111

Ephesians 5:15-20

John 6:51-58

Christians can be perceived, by the non-religious, as judgmental. Many times, we forget that we are as broken as those we pass judgment on. We can easily forget our defects in attitude and character. When we behave this way, we lack wonder and gratitude in our experience as followers of Jesus.

The world needs to see a new type of Christian. We learn from Ephesians 5 that demonstrating hope, peace, joy, and love, in our words and deeds, are essential for anyone to change for the good. For example, in Ephesians, Paul expects those outside the Christian community to fornicate, be greedy, practice all kinds of impurity, be angry, gossip, steal, and grieve the Holy Spirit. Paul is also aware that Christians even do such things. However, as followers of Jesus, we desire to leave those behaviors behind and take on the identity of Jesus. Then, we love others into a “changed” existence, ours as well. So much of this process hinges on our ability to forgive. Really!!

As our Bible study group began focusing on the Ten Commandments in Exodus 20, I felt pretty smug. After all, I didn’t worship more than one God, steal, commit adultery or murder, lie about my neighbors, or plot to cheat them out of what was rightfully theirs. But one evening we came to the command to honor our father and mother.... I thought of my mother, who’d passed away ten years earlier. Honor her when I felt more relief than sorrow at her death? .... My birth was Mother’s “midlife surprise.” .... My father died less than four years later.... Her attempts to shelter me from the world’s influences only fueled my insecurities; I grew from a spoiled child into an anxious, introverted adolescent.... Complicating matters, Mother battled deteriorating health and depression, but because of the rigid faith-healing religion she adhered to, she shunned medical intervention.... By the time I reached my teens, my mother had sunk into a state of apathy. The more I attempted to earn her praise—with high grades, awards, and

interscholastic competitions—the more rejected I felt by her indifference....at age 20 I met the man I'd later marry, my mother openly resented him. Her bigoted remarks about his ancestry horrified us both. I cursed the cruelty of a God who took away my father and left me with an ill, elderly mother who seemed impossible to please.... After my wedding, Mother's downward spiral continued. Our visits usually deteriorated into criticisms about how I raised my children, reproach for my leaving the church in which she'd raised me.... Mother's health finally worsened to the point she committed herself to a nursing home. I attempted a few family visits, hoping she'd enjoy seeing her granddaughters. But she showed little interest in them and often received me with such hostility that I left in tears. Congestive heart failure finally ended her life; she died a bitter, lonely woman.... Finally, .... I came face-to-face with my hardened heart. To harbor contempt and anger, to shut someone out of your life and memory because of perceived hurt or injustice—these aren't the heart attitudes of forgiveness.... I left the Bible class that night convicted to the core.... I began by admitting I needed God's help not only to confront my feelings toward her but also to confess my selfishness and lack of compassion. I acknowledged with gratitude that she gave me life and nurtured me the best she was able.... The next step was to let my mother back into my life.... Resolutely I climbed the attic stairs to retrieve her portrait, carried it to my desk, and stared at it a long time.... *I'm sorry*, I silently told my mother. *I haven't honored you. I've tried to push you from conscious thought. I forgive you, and I pray you've also forgiven me for turning away from you. I want your memory to be a part of my life.* An incredible peace filled me as God enabled me to do what I couldn't do on my own: remember my mother with love. Suddenly I saw her as God created her to be and was able to forgive—and in a small way forget—the hurtful things that had passed between us.... In my mother's eyes I saw the acceptance and approval for which I'd yearned. Did the picture change? No.... What changed was my perception of the past, which in turn has positively affected my present and future. In forgiving and honoring her, I'm breaking the chains of bitterness in my life.<sup>1</sup>

Yes, forgiveness is at the core of living a life of grace, mercy, and compassion.

We need to be more like Jesus in our words and behaviors. And this is where forgiveness comes in. In this regard, Matt Chandler in Bryan Loritts, editor of *Letters To A Birmingham Jail: A Response To The Words And Dreams Of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.* writes, "We've been waiting hundreds of years for the Western church to become more diverse and mirror our brothers and sisters in the first century, where the Christian

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<sup>1</sup>Adapted from *Today's Christian Woman*, © 2009 Christianity Today International. The source is [preachingtoday.com](http://preachingtoday.com).

church stood out as a beacon of beautiful bright light illuminating the distinct value and worth of every human being created in the image of God.”<sup>2</sup> We have some work to do. By trusting Jesus, we become that merciful, compassionate, empathetic beacon of beautiful bright light illuminating the value and worth of every human being created in the image of God.

From the Old Testament, Psalter, Epistle, and Gospel Readings, we discover that being a new creation in Jesus is all about change. In fact, as followers of Jesus become adept at change, we become wiser and our love for God and others deepens. 1 Kings 3:14 reads, pertaining to God’s promise to Solomon, “If you will walk in my ways, keeping my statutes and my commandments, as your father David walked, then I will lengthen your life.” Psalm 111:10 reads, “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom; all those who practice it have a good understanding. His praise endures forever.” Ephesians 5:15 reads, “Be careful then how you live, not as unwise people but as wise...” And John 6:53 reads, “So Jesus said to them, ‘Very truly, I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you.’” Each of these texts challenge us to examine whether our lives are becoming more Jesus’.

In John 6:51-58, we learn that to act and speak in the ways of God, we are to feast on Jesus. We are to ingest and digest him. The acquisition of God’s truth and wisdom is a dominant theme in Johannine literature. It’s not only about intellectual knowledge but the application of that knowledge into everyday behavior. The Lord’s Supper invites us to partake of bread and juice to identify with the sacrificial living of Jesus. When we

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<sup>2</sup>Matt Chandler in Bryan Loritts, ed., *Letters To A Birmingham Jail: A Response To The Words And Dreams Of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Chicago, Illinois: Moody Publishers, 2014), 187.

identify with Jesus, who is the host at the Table, Jesus' ways become ours. He is the bread of life and the light of the world. We offer that bread and light of hope, peace, joy, and love to others. In this way we continue to love the world that Jesus gave his life for. We exist to be good news to others who appear to be lost. We bank our hope on God's plan for salvation that they too can live into being found by God.<sup>3</sup>

Are your life questions being answered based on the world's wisdom or God's? The world's wisdom is fixated on earthly standards of success and self-preservation. God's wisdom opens you up to love others more fully and points you in the direction of pursuing life as God intended. The statement by Jesus that he is the way, the truth and the life, the teachings of the Greatest Commandment, the Sermon on the Mount and Matthew 25 are imperative to be engaged in words and behaviors that are congruent with the gospel. And forgiveness, receiving it from God and others, as well as dispensing it to others, is key to living as a person in the manner of those first century Christians. Ingest and digest Jesus. Be the light of Jesus illuminating the value and worth of every human being. Amen.

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<sup>3</sup>In the two paragraphs of textual analysis above, I have benefited from the thinking of L. Julianna Claassens, Tim Meadowcroft, Angela Dienhart Hancock, Adam J. Copeland, Charles L. Aaron Jr., Magrey R. Devega, and Barbara K. Lundblad in Joel B. Green, Thomas G. Long, Luke A. Powery, Cynthia L. Rigby and Carolyn J. Sharp, editors, *Connections, Year B, Volume 3* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2020), 230-232, 232-234, 235-237, 238-239, 240-241, 242-243 and 244-245.