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Eight Steps to Christlikeness

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EIGHT STEPS TO CHRISTLIKENESS

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Eight Steps to Christlikeness

Think with me for a moment about this question, "What has been the most decisive moment in your life?" The Christian answers, "The day I obeyed Jesus Christ. The time in my life when I completely surrendered to His sovereign control over me." Paul, a New Testament Christian, looked back on his life as he wrote to the church at Corinth and exclaimed, "but thanks be to God, who giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ" (I Corinthians 15:57). During His earthly ministry Jesus made our alternatives in life uncomfortably clear. He said, "I am the light of the world: he that followeth me shall not walk in the darkness, but shall have the light of life" (John 8:12). Today every one of us faces "the light of life" or the "darkness" of sin and rebellion against God. Jesus also challenged those who followed Him with these thoughts, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life: no one cometh unto the Father, but by me" (John 14:6). Again the challenge for me and you this very hour is God's "way, truth, and life" versus human indirection and confusion! A choice is made by every human being. Sadly enough the indecision that most of us experience regarding Jesus Christ is in reality a rejection! But there are those who courageously face their own weakness, sin, and confusion. Out of our honest struggles with the claims of Jesus come decisions that shape the remainder of life here and all of life hereafter.

To those who obey Christ the New Testament Epistles are written principally to urge that once deciding to follow Christ, we must continue in the path He trod for us!

Paul counsels Christians at Colossae, "As therefore ye received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him, rooted and built up in him, and established in your faith, even as ye were taught, abounding in thanksgiving" (Colossians 2:6). Peter exhorts in his First Epistle, "For hereunto were ye called: because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, that ye should follow his steps: ..." (I Peter 2:21). Christians must "lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us and let us run with patience the race that is set before us." This is done by "looking unto Jesus the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising shame, and hath sat down at the right hand of God" (Hebrews 12:1, 2). The Christian's aim, as these passages so strongly suggest, is Christlikeness.

But this raises the question, or questions, "What is Christlikeness and is it a rewarding life?" Many New Testament descriptions of Christlikeness could be offered, but one stands boldly before us, the beatitudes. As we read them together notice the eight steps to Christlikeness which they offer.

Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
Blessed are they that mourn: for they shall be comforted.
Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth.
Blessed are they that hunger and thirst after righteousness: for they shall be filled.
Blessed are the merciful: for they shall obtain mercy.
Blessed are the pure in heart: for they shall see God.
Blessed are the peacemakers: for they shall be called sons of God.
Blessed are they that have been persecuted for righteousness sake: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
Blessed are ye when men shall reproach you, and persecute you, and say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake.
Rejoice, and be exceeding glad: for great is your reward in heaven: for so persecuted they the prophets that were before you (Matthew 5:1-12).

The first beatitude of Matthew five says that the Christ-like person accepts God's plan for his life. "Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 5:3). The emphasis here is on the attitude toward life that allows God's Word to be one's guide instead of the many competing systems and ways of men. But to accept God's plan one must realize and accept His full sway over and in my life. Jesus teaches us, "Verily I say unto you, Except ye turn, and become as little children, ye shall in no wise enter into the kingdom of heaven. Whosoever shall humble himself as this little child, the same is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 18:3, 4). The childlike life of humility, openness to God's will, and the lack of stubborn rebellion creates the attitude described as "poor in spirit."

The individual who will accept God's plan for his life is willing to divest himself of all selfish ambition. God says, "I dwell in the high and holy place, with him also that is of a contrite and humble spirit, to revive the spirit of the humble, and to revive the heart of the contrite" (Isaiah 57:15). Paul believed so strongly in God's plan as revealed in Christ that he reminded the Corinthian Christians, "And I, brethren, when I came unto you, came not with excellency of speech or of wisdom, proclaiming to you the testimony of God. For I determined not to know anything among you, save Jesus Christ, and him crucified" (I Corinthians 2:1, 2). Tradition-laden Judaism, classical philosophy, and materialistic paganism, had all offered their "life plans" to Paul. But now, following his decision to obey Christ, there was only one message which he lived and preached — "Jesus Christ, and him crucified". Christ-likeness calls for our willing and total acceptance of God's plan, revealed in Christ, for our lives.

The Christlike person lives with a deep consciousness of sorrow. "Blessed are they that mourn: for they shall be comforted" (Matthew 5:4). No one knew this attitude of heart and life like the Master. Isaiah predicted in the Old Testament, "He was despised, and rejected of men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief: and as one from whom men hide their face he was despised; and we esteemed him not" (Isaiah 53:3). The shortest verse in the Bible has often been damaged by the frivolous use made of it in pseudo-memory work. But when John, in his Gospel, tells us that "Jesus wept" at the death of His dear friend Lazarus, we look at one that mourned (John 11:35). He also wept over the fate of Jerusalem as He looked back at her unwillingness to accept His ministry and looked forward to her destruction, in less than forty years, by the Roman armies (Luke 19:41, 42).

Paul saw a spiritual need in his life that made him live with a deep consciousness of sorrow. "For I know that in me, that is, in my flesh, dwelleth no good thing: for to will is present with me, but to do that which is good is not" (Romans 7:18). Later in the same chapter he cries out in anguish, "Wretched man that I am! Who shall deliver me out of the body of this death?" (Romans 7:24). But such sorrow is not wasted, that is, if it is "godly sorrow." Paul explains what I mean. "For godly sorrow worketh repentance unto salvation, a repentance which bringeth no regret: but the sorrow of the world worketh death" (II Corinthians 7:10). As earthly and physical sorrow brings refinement of thought and conduct to the sensitive individual, so spiritual agony, when properly exposed to the light of Christ's gospel, brings one to a spiritual commitment for life. Christ-likeness calls for one to live with a deep consciousness of sorrow.

The Christlike person also demonstrates control and gentleness in all areas of life. "Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth" (Matthew 5:5). The word "meek" has no strong connotations in our time, but Aristotle, three hundred years before Christ, used the term to indicate that golden mean between excessive anger and complete lack of anger. To clear away the negative meanings attached to "meekness" we have only to remember two of the strongest men in the Bible, Moses and Jesus. "Now the man Moses was very meek, above all the men that were upon the face of the earth," the Old Testament book of Numbers records (Numbers 12:3). Jesus invites us to come to Him and says, "Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls" (Matthew 11:29). The proper picture painted by this term is that of a gentle and controlled life. The strong individual can be "meek" through wise and restrained use of his or her power.

The Christlike individual also longs for the godly sound of life — the sound, and the whiteness of this "are the pure in heart" (Matthew 5:8). Solomon knew the value of a good heart and counseled, "Keep thy heart with all diligence; for out of it are the issues of life" (Proverbs 4:23). The gospel can purify one's heart when he or she surrenders in obedient faith to Christ (Acts 15:9). From such a regenerated heart comes love, a good conscience, and great faith, Paul says in I Timothy 1:5. The purity Jesus talks about in this beatitude also refers to motive and intention. One "pure in heart" is the very opposite of James' "doubleminded man, unstable in all his ways" (James 1:8). The Christian knows where he is going and under whose power he travels. He keeps his vision clear and purpose singular. This makes for purity of thought and motive.

Christlikeness requires that one live by singular emotion and unmixed motive. "Blessed are the pure in heart: for they shall see God" (Matthew 5:8). "But aren't the immoral requests of man also granted? To which we answer, "Yes, their immoral requests are often granted; but their lusts are never satisfied." Jesus says that those who long for righteousness "shall be filled." Although she did not realize the seriousness of her request, the Samaritan woman at Jacob's well made the kind of request the Christlike must make. "Sir, give me this water, that I thirst not, neither come all the way hither to draw" (John 4:15). Jesus talked of the living water of God's Word which men find today in the Bible (Hebrews 4:12). Jesus pleads with us, "Work not for the food which perisheth, but for the food which abideth unto eternal life, which the Son of man shall give unto you: for him the Father, even God, hath sealed" (John 6:27). The Christlike long for the spiritual nourishment of Bible study. They search for the sound, the wholesome, the pure and noble in all life endeavors.

The Christlike actively seek to understand and accept others. "Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth" (Matthew 5:5). To be merciful is to respond to God's mercy already shown us in Jesus Christ (Luke 6:36). Mercy has been called "a self-acting law of the moral world." In the words of James, "For judgment is without mercy to him that hath showed no mercy: mercy glorieth against judgment" (James 2:13). In a day when tensions between men and nations abound, when prejudice and hate seem to overflow men's hearts, and even neighbors have difficulties, we look to Christ's reaction to the men of His time and see mercy on every hand!

Christlikeness also calls for understanding and acceptance of each other. "Blessed are the pure in heart: for they shall see God" (Matthew 5:8). Solomon knew the value of a good heart and counseled, "Keep thy heart with all diligence; for out of it are the issues of life" (Proverbs 4:23). The gospel can purify one's heart when he or she surrenders in obedient faith to Christ (Acts 15:9). From such a regenerated heart comes love, a good conscience, and great faith, Paul says in I Timothy 1:5. The purity Jesus talks about in this beatitude also refers to motive and intention. One "pure in heart" is the very opposite of James' "doubleminded man, unstable in all his ways" (James 1:8). The Christian knows where he is going and under whose power he travels. He keeps his vision clear and purpose singular. This makes for purity of thought and motive.

Christlikeness also calls for the Christian's active promotion of order and harmony among men. "Blessed are the peacemakers: for they shall be called the sons of God" (Matthew 5:9). Notice that the "peaceful" are not blessed
in this beatitude. Only the "peacemaker," the active promoter of peace and harmony, receives God's blessing! The Christian is at home with peace, it was created in his life and brought into his soul in his justification. "Being therefore justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ," Paul wrote (Romans 5:1). The Biblical concept of reconciliation brings about peace and harmony between man and God, and among all those so coming to God (Ephesians 2:11-19). The Christian can "overcome evil with good," because he possesses within himself that quality of life that promotes peace and harmony (Romans 12:21).

Finally, let me suggest that Christlikeness prepares one to triumph in trials. "Blessed are they that have been persecuted for righteousness' sake: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 5:10). The Christian knows trial is inevitable. He is in the midst of a total, all-out war, with eternal consequences (Ephesians 6:10-12). But he also knows that the burdens of this life "are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed" (Romans 8:18). The Christian knows that greater similarity to Christ comes with every test of life. Peter says that suffering brings refinement to our faith (1 Peter 3:14, 15). Because of God's abiding comfort, life, and power, triumph is the continual note, even in the very midst of turmoil! "But thanks be unto God, who always leadeth us in triumph in Christ, and maketh manifest through us the savor of his knowledge in every place" (II Corinthians 2:14).

The eight steps to Christlikeness are revealed in Matthew, chapter five, verses one through twelve. The Christlike individual accepts God's plan for his life; lives with a deep consciousness or sorrow; demonstrates control and gentleness in all areas of life; longs for the godly — the sound and the wholesome; actively seeks to understand and accept others; lives by singular emotion and unmixed motive; promotes order and harmony among men; and triumphs in trial.

But such a life must have a beginning point, which the Bible teaches is faith, in God and His Son, Jesus Christ (Hebrews 11:6; John 20:30, 31). Biblical faith prompts obedience to the Christ whose example we follow. He commands, "He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that disbelieveth shall be condemned" (Mark 16:16). Obey Him now, and grow into greater Christlikeness each day!