TRUE Sons



Colin Urquhart

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Kingdom Faith Resources
Roffey Place, Old Crawley Road,
HORSHAM West Sussex, RH12 4RU.
Tel: 01293 851543
E-mail: resources@kingdomfaith.com
www.kingdomfaith.com

First published in Great Britain in March 2004 by Kingdom Faith
Kingdom Faith Church is a registered charity (no.278746)

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ISBN 1-900409-53-4

Acknowledgements

My thanks to the Lord for over forty years, experience in church ministry and leadership. I have come to understand that leadership is a vital subject, for whatever happens in a local congregation will be a reflection of the spiritual leadership they are given!

My thanks to Michelle and Sandy for their work on the text and to Chris for the design and layout. I am also thankful to the Lord for all who share with me in leadership of Kingdom Faith, which has now become a multi-faceted worldwide ministry. Together we are thankful to the Lord, whose grace alone has enabled this.

Colin Urquhart

Inheritance

Jesus Christ was sent to earth by God the Father to bring the Good News of the Kingdom of Heaven. He came to make that Kingdom available *now* to all who believe in Him. Everyone who is born again of God's Holy Spirit receives that Kingdom as a gift, becomes a son of God and a co-heir with Christ of all the riches of His Heavenly Kingdom.

During His earthly ministry Jesus spoke of God's Kingdom and demonstrated its power and authority through the things He did. He knew that the lives of His followers would be dramatically changed after the crucifixion, resurrection, His return to heaven and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit into their lives. Then they would be able to experience the power of God's Kingdom in an entirely new way.

He could not speak openly of His crucifixion, for the general understanding of the people did not remotely consider the possibility of their Messiah meeting such a death. They expected God's Son to come in triumph and establish the nation of Israel politically as well as spiritually. It was unthinkable that He should come as a Servant ready to die on a cross, the most shameful death, for the sins of mankind.

So it was beyond anyone's expectation that there would need to be a physical resurrection. Even though towards the end of His ministry Jesus prophesied this to His inner group of disciples, they clearly did not expect to see Him again in a physical body. Neither did they understand that the cross would involve them personally, that in some way they were being crucified with Christ. As a result their old lives would pass away and an entirely new life become possible, sharing in His risen life.

It would be totally beyond them to understand that they would be glorified with Christ in heavenly places. Nor could they imagine fully the consequences of the Lord's Spirit being in them, as opposed to being with them during His ministry.

Jesus did not pray for the disciples to receive the Holy Spirit at the beginning of

His ministry because it was to be the risen, ascended, glorified Spirit of the Christ, God's Son, that would be given to them on the day of Pentecost.

How could Jesus speak, while on earth, of these future things that would be totally beyond the comprehension of the disciples? Of course after these great events the disciples would understand much more of the significance of the crucifixion, resurrection and ascension of Jesus. Yet it was important for Jesus to speak of these things; but He could only do so in a veiled or secret way. Later the disciples would understand the hidden messages in His parables, many of which spoke of the future, even though they would have had a more immediate meaning for the crowds who first heard them.

After giving the parable of the sower, the disciples asked Jesus why He used parables in His teaching. They were politely pointing out that not everyone understood what He meant by these parables. Jesus replied by saying:

The knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you, but not to them. (Matthew 13:11)

In other words, these parables contained a secret message that Jesus would explain to His close disciples, but not to the people generally. It would only be later, after they had received the Holy Spirit, that they would come to understand fully what He was saying!

So we can see that the parables could be understood at two levels. There was an immediate message for those who heard Jesus preach, but there was a deeper, hidden message that would only become apparent later. This is true of one of the best known of Jesus' parables, that often referred to as 'The Prodigal Son'. This is not a good title, for the parable is about a father who had two sons; and all three characters are important in what Jesus teaches through this parable! You can read the full text of the parable in Luke 15:11-32.

No doubt to those who first heard this parable it would have been interpreted as a message about someone living a very worldly lifestyle, who comes to a place of repentance, gives his life to God the Father and is welcomed into His Kingdom with mercy, forgiveness and love. The self-righteous brother, on the other hand, refused to forgive him nor would he enter into the celebration feast.

The parable is often used thus in an evangelistic way; yet this is not the true significance of the parable. It is perfectly valid to use it to speak to people in

such a way; but there is a secret, hidden message about the Kingdom here – a wonderful revelation of what it means to be a true son of God, a son of the Kingdom of Heaven *now!* What is this 'secret' message that could only be understood in the light of the crucifixion, resurrection, ascension to glory of the risen Christ and the sending of the Holy Spirit upon the believers?

- First, this is a parable about a Father, signifying God the Father, who had two sons. Now the New Testament is clear that **only those who have faith in Jesus Christ and have been born again of the Spirit are *sons* of God.** So this is, strictly speaking, not a parable about someone needing to come into relationship with God through repentance and faith. Both boys are already sons. They already have God for their Father and a Kingdom inheritance!
- The younger son comes to the Father and asks for his inheritance. If he was not already a son of God, belonging to His Kingdom, he would not have had an inheritance to claim from God the Father.
- **Because he has the right of inheritance and lays claim to it, the Father gives it to him without delay or agreement,** even though he must have known the unstable nature of this younger son!
- Unfortunately, the younger son leaves his Father's house, chooses to go off in independence and wastes his inheritance. He chooses a worldly life style rather than use his inheritance for the good of the Kingdom and the glory of his Father.
- The young son loses everything and ends up in the lowest possible state, the fate of many who have deserted the Lord's ways. He finds himself feeding pigs, the most demeaning job possible for a Jew! He even envied the pigs because their food was better than his own.
- The young son 'comes to his senses'! He realised that even the servants in his Father's house fared better than himself. He makes the decision to return home, first working out what he will say to his Father:

  Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired men. (Luke 15:18–19)

- Many who have wasted their Kingdom inheritance feel they are no longer worthy to be regarded as sons of God!
- The Father, who has patiently been anticipating the return of His son, sees him coming in the distance. **He can hardly contain His love for His son.**

Instead of judging or condemning him for his actions, He goes running to meet him. Before the son can begin his prepared speech, the Father embraces Him in a hug of forgiveness and acceptance. He can tell that the son has already experienced a change of heart. Hence his return home!

- The son begins his 'prayer' of repentance, but as soon as he suggests that he is no longer worthy to be called a son, the Father interrupts what he says. He orders the servants to be quick and bring three things for the son, each being highly significant.
- First, the servants are to bring the best robe and put it on His young son. What does this robe signify? **In the New Testament Jesus Himself is that robe.** Paul says: *'all of you who were baptised into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.' (Gal. 3:27)*
- Jesus could not have spoken in an open way about the people needing to clothe themselves with Himself! Just before going to the cross, He said to the eleven disciples: *'Abide in me and I in you.' (John 15:4)* However, they would only have truly understood what this meant for them after Jesus had returned to heaven and they had received the Holy Spirit.
- Second, the Father tells the servants to put a ring on the young son's finger. **The ring would have been a signet ring, the sign of authority, Kingdom authority.** Jesus told the disciples that He had given them authority over all the power of the evil one, and that nothing would harm them. The authority and power of His Kingdom is much greater than the devil's power!
- Third, the servants were to bring shoes for the young son's feet. Shoes are a symbol of the gospel. **Now the son has returned home he is again robed with Christ; his Kingdom authority and power are restored to him and wherever he goes he does so in the full knowledge that all the life and promises of the gospel are his. He can spread the good news of God's Kingdom!**
- This concludes the first part of the parable. The younger son is now fully restored to his Kingdom life and inheritance, despite his former sin and wastefulness. The Father ordered the fattened calf, an animal kept for very special occasions, to be slaughtered and calls for a great feast to celebrate the restoration of His young son. Such a celebration speaks of the totality of God's forgiveness, acceptance and love.
- Now we must consider the second part of the parable that focuses on the older son. The remarkable thing about the latter part of this parable is that Jesus could clearly see prophetically what would happen in the history of the Church!
- The older son stands for the diligent, hard-working Christian. He has a fair

degree of self-righteousness and sees his own hardwork as grounds of his acceptance before his Father – not his Father's love, mercy and grace!

- This older son returns home from a hard day's toil in the fields to the sound of the celebration that was taking place. He enquires of a servant what has taken place and is told that his brother has returned and the Father has killed the fattened calf.
- The older son is angry! He refuses to go in and join the feast.
- The Father loves this older son and leaves the feast to plead with him.
- In self-righteous indignation the son blurts out: *'All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!' (Luke 15:29-30)*
- This son has the mentality of a slave, not a son! He refuses to forgive his brother or even acknowledge him as his brother, referring to him instead as 'this son of yours'! There is no grace or mercy in his attitudes.
- It never seems to occur to him that if his brother asked for his inheritance and was given it, he too could have come to the Father and asked for what he had wanted. He did not have the faith to expect his Father to given him even a young goat!
- This son is typical of the religious person, full of good works, but with little faith in the Father's love. He is striving to please his Father instead of living in His acceptance!
- The Father's answer to the older son is highly significant: *'My son, you are always with me and everything I have is yours'. (v 31)*
- **As the older son he had a full claim to his inheritance but never made use of it! Everything his Father had was his, but he never claimed any of it.** He lived his life in his own strength and not with the resources of one robed with Christ, with the authority of the Kingdom and all the riches of the gospel. In other words, he was as much a waster as his younger brother, for he never even laid claim to his inheritance. He lived as a slave rather than as a son!
- **God has blessed us, as his sons, with every spiritual blessing in heavenly places in Christ. So for every true Christian it is true that all the Father has is theirs!**
- Finally, the Father points out to the son that his young brother *'died and is alive again; he was lost and is found' (v 32).* Such statements one would expect to be made of a new believer. But here the Father is clearly referring to a son. Presumably when he left home to lead a life of sin, the young son

effectively threw off the garment of Christ, forsook his Kingdom authority and turned his back on the gospel. However, **all those riches were restored when he returned to his Father!**

- What a rich parable this is, and what far reaching lessons there are to be learned from it! Above all we see that God wants not only to make all who believe in the saving work of Jesus Christ His sons; He wants them to live as sons, in the full blessing of their inheritance.

Sons Of God

We need to see how the sons of God can live in the good of all that God has done for them and made available to them through the life and ministry of His Son, Jesus Christ. Paul writes:

You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. (Galatians 3:26)

This is a highly significant statement. It speaks of how a person becomes a son of God: 'through faith in Christ Jesus.' The person believes that God sent His Son to die for his or her sins. He even took the sinner to the cross with Him, so he or she could die to the old life *without* Christ and be given a new life *in* Christ. **All that is His becomes the possession of the believer.** However, he or she also has to acknowledge that he or she has become the Lord's possession. He has literally bought him or her, purchased the believer for the Father with His own sacrificial blood! Notice that all, whether male or female, were referred to as sons of God, for all share in the same rights of inheritance. Paul continues to explain:

For all of you who were baptised into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. (v 27)

When baptised in water, the new believer is not baptised into the Church, but into Christ Himself. Now he can fulfill the Lord's command to live in Christ and He in him! He has chosen to clothe himself with Christ.

To live in Christ continuously, which is the Lord's purpose, is choosing to live with the best robe, clothed with Christ. It is to exercise the Kingdom authority and power God gives you. It is to walk in the truth of the gospel, the truth that Jesus says will enable you to live in freedom.

In other words, you make the choice to *live* as a son of God because He has made you His son. What is the point of being a son, yet living with a slave mentality, trying to win the Lord's acceptance through your good works. Not only is this impossible, it is unnecessary. For it is only possible to be made acceptable in God's sight through the blood of Jesus Christ washing you from all

your guilt, sin and failure. And you can live in an acceptable way through the power of the Holy Spirit living in you.

And so only God Himself can make you a son through all that Jesus has done for you. And only the Holy Spirit of God can enable you to live as a son! You are saved by His grace and can only live as a son through His grace! Paul explains that in Christ:

There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. (Galatians 3:28)

Everyone in Christ, all who are robed with Christ, have the same inheritance. All have the rights and principles of sons, whether male or female, whether Jew or non-Jew, no matter what their social status. All become heirs of all the promises God has given in the Old and New Testament. They become co-heirs with Christ himself!

The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children. Now if we are children, then we are heirs – heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory. (Romans 8:16-17)

These verses reveal further significant truths.

- **When you became a child or son of God, your human spirit came to life because God's Spirit came to live in your spirit.** I shall explain this more fully later.
- In other words, ***we know beyond doubt*** **that we are God's sons if we have received the Holy Spirit.** Paul says that God's Spirit is the guarantee of our inheritance that is to come – not only what we inherit now, but also of what we shall inherit with our precious Lord in the glory of heaven.
- **We *are* already co-heirs with Christ.** We inherit whatever life is His: eternal life, divine love, His power, grace, joy and all the fruit of His Spirit. Jesus becomes not only our Saviour and Lord, but our Healer, Provider, Rock and Shepherd. He is for us the Way, the Truth, the Life; the Resurrection and the Life. He is our Head and we are members of His Body. And He wants us to live in the good of all that He is!
- **We shall share in His glory in heaven.** But is there a price to pay? Yes, not in being made sons, nor in the inheritance we are given, but in the

> outworking of our lives as the sons of God. To share in His sufferings is not to undertake what He did on the cross. That is a completed and perfect work that has established the possibility of all mankind being saved. There is nothing we can do, nor need to do, to add to what Jesus has done for us through the perfect sacrifice of Himself on our behalf.

Neither is sickness the suffering referred to here, because Jesus was never sick; and we are to share in *His* sufferings! No, the suffering that Paul refers to is what Jesus warned His disciples about. In following Him, the world will treat us as it treated Him.

Remember the words I spoke to you: 'No servant is greater than his master.' If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also. They will treat you this way because of my name, for they do not know the One who sent me. (John 15:20-21)

Persecution and opposition may come from the world or from religious traditionalists; Jesus suffered at the hands of both! One thing is certain, if we live as sons we shall enjoy all the rights and principles of sons, but we shall also suffer the cost of opposition as Jesus did! He said:

Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven. (Matthew 5:11-12)

Jesus says we are even to leap with joy when persecuted! In the natural nobody enjoys opposition, being misunderstood, or being falsely accused. As sons we bear the name of God Himself. I am Colin in Christ, clothed with Christ. You are John in Christ, Mary in Christ – or whatever your name is! You share His life, and that is wonderful! You share the cost of bearing witness to that Name, and that is inevitable!

However, the privileges of being a son far outweigh the cost, and the heavenly rewards are eternal! You do not need to focus on the cost, simply know that it is costly to love others with the same love as Jesus loves us. It is costly to the flesh to obey the Lord, and will involve denying ourselves, taking up our cross and following after Him! It is costly to face the trials of faith and the opposition we will inevitably encounter!

The only alternative is not to be a son and have no inheritance from God or to be a disobedient, sinful self-seeking son like the prodigal before he repented and

returned to his Father! **Better to be a loving, obedient and faithful son living to please your heavenly Father and inheriting all that He has promised to give you.**

The Spirit Of Sonship

Paul says, those who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. (Romans 8:14)

To live as a son involves not only receiving the Holy Spirit as a gift from God, but being led by His Spirit. We can only be led if we are willing to follow Him. This suggests that the Holy Spirit will have the agenda for our lives, and that He will want to maintain the initiative in determining the direction our lives are to take as sons of God.

In other words, **God has purpose for every one of His sons. He has work for them to accomplish here on earth before they take their appointed place in heaven.**

We have seen that when a person is born again and becomes a child of God, his or her spirit is brought to life by the Holy Spirit. To understand how to live as sons of God, we need to understand the difference between our human spirits and our souls. God's Word will help us in this:

For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. (Hebrews 4:12)

God's Word 'divides' soul and spirit. It helps us to see what is of the soul and what is of the spirit in our lives, what is of self and what of God.

First, let us be clear what is meant by the soul. In the New Testament there is a Greek word *psuche* which is translated by two words: 'life' and 'soul'. Many Christians are confused by not being able to distinguish between the natural life of the soul, and God's life He places in the human spirit. God's Word will help us to sort out this confusion.

Your soul is your natural life, your self life, the person you are with the natural characteristics that you have. Everyone has a soul, whether a believer in Jesus Christ or not. It is impossible for a human being to exist without a soul!

The soul life has certain abilities, some common to everyone, others particular abilities often referred to as natural 'gifts'. Every human being has a mind or intellect – part of the soul life. Everyone has emotions or feelings, another part of the soul life. Everyone has his or her will, the ability to make decisions and choices.

Those three functions of the soul life, mind, emotions and will, interact continually. Before they come alive with God's Spirit, people make decisions without reference to God. They are led by their own ideas and opinions, they depend heavily upon their own feelings and adopt the general attitude: 'I will do what I want to do with my life.' They live as human beings, but not as sons of God!

Before being born again their spirits lay dormant. God is Spirit, not a soul. He communicates to us Spirit to spirit – both when speaking to us and acting in our lives. Your spirit came to life with His Spirit when you were born again. As a believer Christ is in you, in your *spirit man.* This is the phrase I am going to use for the sake of clarity: your spirit man. This is quite distinct from your soul, your natural life. Your spirit man is the deep, innermost part of your being where, as a son of God, Christ has come to live by the power of His Spirit.

It was your spirit man, not your soul, that was clothed with Christ when you became a son of God. If your soul life was clothed with Christ you would already exhibit His character and personality in a perfect way! As it is you can believe that you have the Spirit of Christ in your spirit man, and yet know clearly that there are many things about your natural soul life that are inconsistent with, even contradictory to, His life.

In your spirit man you have the mind of Christ; yet in your natural mind, part of your soul, you can have negative, critical, judgmental, unclean, greedy, lustful, jealous, selfish and proud thoughts that have nothing to do with the mind of Christ!

This helps us to see that God's purpose is that the life He has put in your spirit man increasingly influences your soul or natural life. The soul is to be under the influence of God's Spirit in your spirit or you will walk in the flesh, not the Spirit. To walk in the flesh is to live like an unbeliever, making your decisions independently of God's Word or purpose for you. In the New Testament, the flesh is your soul and body acting independently of God, and

therefore in rebellion against His authority and Lordship!

Just as you have all your natural qualities in your soul, both good and bad, so you have all the qualities of God's Spirit in your spirit man; and they are all good qualities. The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of truth and Jesus says He will guide you into all the truth. He will remind you of all Jesus has said and done. So He is God's wisdom to you within your spirit man.

You can have all kinds of thoughts, attitudes and opinions in your soul life that are a contradiction to the truth. So again we see the spirit man is to prevail over your soul life so that you can walk in the truth, the truth that sets you free and keeps you in the *'glorious freedom of the children of God'. (Romans 8:21)*

The qualities of the Holy Spirit, known as the fruit of the Spirit, are also in your spirit man, if you have been filled with the Holy Spirit.

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. (Galatians 5:22-23)

It is easy to see that in your soul life there can be many things and emotions that contradict those qualities: selfishness instead of love, sadness instead of joy, anxiety and fear in place of peace. Many believers struggle with impatience even though the patience of the Spirit is in their spirit man. They fight against feelings of unforgiveness, revenge and injustice, while the kindness and goodness of the Holy Spirit is in their spirit man. They are not always faithful to the Lord or to others, while God's faithfulness is there within them.

It seems the soul life of the Christian is so strong that it wants to retain control of his or her life. One of the qualities of the Holy Spirit is self-control, the ability to keep that soul life, the self-life, under control so that it does not dominate the believer's life, allowing the life of the Holy Spirit in his or her spirit man to be expressed.

Jesus promised that believers would be filled with power when the Holy Spirit came upon them. **Within the believer's spirit man is the power that raised Jesus from the dead, the supernatural, almighty power of God.** This is the power that enabled Jesus to heal the sick and perform miracles among the people. The soul life can appear very powerful, but is not a match for God's power! It makes no sense for believers to trust in their own power to do God's will in their daily lives, while all the time having His power within them!

We could go on to contrast the natural life of the soul with God's life in the spirit man, but we would continue to come to the same conclusion: **that the soul must be kept in submission to the spirit man so that God's life can then be expressed in the soul of the believer.** In other words, the life in the spirit man must always have pre-eminence over the soul life or the natural life of the believer. Jesus described this as the disciple needing to deny himself in order to take up his cross and follow Him!

The principle is clear, but what does Jesus teach us as His disciples, as sons of God, that will enable this to become a reality in our lives, rather than merely a good spiritual aspiration?

Denying The Soul Life

At Caesarea Philippi, Jesus asked His disciples a key question: *'Who do you say I am?' (Matthew 16:15)* It was Simon Peter who ended the speculation that had no doubt been going on among the disciples:

Simon Peter answered, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." (Matthew 16:16)

This is the key revelation. This Man is not simply an extraordinary preacher, prophet and miracle worker. This is none other than the Messiah, God's Son!

Now that they know His true identity, Jesus chooses this moment to tell them for the first time that He will suffer, be rejected, killed, but on the third day raised to life. This does not fit in at all with Peter's soulish understanding of the Messiah; so he takes Jesus aside and even rebukes Him!

"Never, Lord!" he said. "This shall never happen to you!" (v 22)

Jesus turns to Peter and says to him: *'Get behind me, Satan. You are a stumbling-block to me; you do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men.' (v 23)*

One moment Jesus is commending Peter for being the mouthpiece of God the Father, because he has listened to the revelation given him by the Holy Spirit that Jesus is the Messiah, God's Son. A little later He is calling Peter the mouthpiece of Satan, because in listening to his own soulish ideas and thoughts he is contradicting the truth, the revelation brought by Jesus Himself, and even daring to rebuke the One he has just recognized as God's Son!

Jesus then gives the disciples further revelation. Just as He is going to have to face the cross, they too will have a cross to carry, but of a different kind.

Then Jesus said to his disciples, *'If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.' (v 24)*

- Notice first that this is a word for *anyone* who would follow Jesus, not only for the original twelve disciples. So as modern day sons of God called to be disciples of Jesus, this is a word for us today!
- **Jesus says that every follower *'must deny himself '.*** This is not an option, but an absolute necessity! What is the disciple to deny? Himself, his natural soul life. As with Peter's rebuke, this is so often in opposition to the life of the Spirit within the believer. In this particular instance, his natural understanding stood in stark contrast to the truth Jesus had just revealed.
- The disciple, or follower of Jesus, will have to *'take up his cross'*. Note that this is not Jesus' cross. He had to go alone to His cross. That was a work no one could share with Him, for He was giving Himself in sacrifice for us. The scripture makes clear that this was a once for all event that was complete in itself and would never need to be repeated.
- So what is the cross the follower of Jesus has to carry? The cross of self-denial, **the cost he willingly and lovingly undertakes in order to be faithful and obedient to his Lord.** No matter what it costs him he will have to deny himself, his natural soul life, in order to live in dependence on his spirit man!

- The result of this self-denial is that the son of God, the believer, the disciple, the follower of Jesus, will follow Jesus. He will allow the Spirit of God to lead him in the way God wants him to go. Jesus continues:

  For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it. (v 25)

- Every Christian can rejoice in God's salvation purposes. Before being born again we were 'lost' because Satan is the father of the unredeemed. Those who are not born again belong to his dominion; the scripture is clear about this. It is Jesus who *'has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the Kingdom of the Son he loves'. (Colossians 1:13)* Jesus speaking of Himself, said:

  For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost. (Luke 19:10)

  As sons of God we are no longer 'lost', in the sense of belonging to the devil's domain; he no longer has any hold over us. However, if Jesus has saved us there is another sense in which we need to be 'lost' – **not separated from God, but lost in God, belonging totally and exclusively**

to Him, because He has purchased us for God with His own blood!

You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honour God with your body. (1 Corinthians 6:20)

Jesus, the Lamb of God sacrificed for us, has literally *'purchased men for God' (Revelation 5:9)* with His own blood. We are *now* lost to Him! We live in Him and He in us as sons of God!

So Jesus saves us from the devil only for us to lose our lives to God! One thing is certain: we do not belong to ourselves, but to the One who purchased us with His own blood! But what does it mean, to lose your life?

The Greek word here is *psuche*, which we have seen can be translated as either 'life' or 'soul', meaning the natural life of the believer! In order to save his soul from the devil, the Christian has to lose his soul to Jesus!

In other words, his natural soul life must not dictate or control the course of his life as a believer. **The Holy Spirit living in his spirit man is to be in control!** The soul or natural life has to be submitted to the Holy Spirit living in and working through his spirit man.

- The paradox is this: **that whoever loses his life to Jesus, finds *real* life.** You cannot exist without a soul; but your soul will come to life in a new way when the life of the Spirit is allowed to impact your soul! Jesus continues:

  What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul? (Matthew 16:26)

  A person can use his natural life for himself, become wealthy and have everything he wants in this world, and yet still belong to the devil's domain! So what good will this do him eternally? There is no way in which he can buy salvation, no matter how much wealth he has accumulated! Jesus is the only way to salvation!

  The one who loses his soul to Jesus will not only 'find' his life in this world, but he will also have a rich reward in God's heavenly Kingdom! However, we still need greater revelation in order to understand what Jesus means by our need to 'lose' our souls, or deny ourselves, deny the natural

soul life.

Hating The Soul

Jesus makes even more radical statements to explain what is involved in losing your soul life to God, statements that are often either avoided or misunderstood.

I tell you the truth, unless a grain of wheat falls in the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds. (John 12:24)

This is true in the natural processes within creation, but also in the spiritual realm as well. These words apply first and foremost to Jesus Himself, and speak of the abundant fruit that was going to be produced from His willingness to give His life sacrificially on the cross. Through the death of the one Son, Jesus Christ, countless millions have received the new life of God's Kingdom. Unless that Seed had fallen to the ground and died, no one could have received the Kingdom as their inheritance, or become sons of God!

However, Jesus is here speaking of a principle that is true for His followers as well. In 'losing' their souls, they will have to 'die' to self. Taking up their cross implies that a death needs to take place, a sacrifice has to be offered!

It must be made clear immediately that Jesus is *not* saying that in some way we have to put our self-lives to death. He has completed a process on the cross of which we are a part. Paul states this clearly in giving a brief summary of his personal testimony:

I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me. (Galatians 2:20)

Jesus not only died for our sins; He literally took sinners to the cross with Him! In this way He purchased us for God that now we might belong to Him and to His Kingdom!

Paul is saying that his old life, without Christ, was taken to the cross by Jesus. When He died, that old life died. So now Paul can have new life, be a new creation belonging to God, with Christ living in his spirit man.

To deny himself is not, therefore, to try to put his self-life to death, but live by faith in what the Son of God has done for him!

As a believer, you could say of yourself: 'When Jesus died, he took my old life as a sinner to the cross. When He died I died with Him. My water baptism signifies then that I have died and lie buried with Christ. Because the Holy Spirit has been given to me, this is the very evidence that now I have been raised to a new life. I now live in Christ and He in me! So I choose no longer to live for myself, but for Him who died and gave His life for me! And I do this by putting my faith in the One who died for me. I acknowledge that I am His: spirit, soul and body!'

John repeats what we need in Matthew's gospel, but here Jesus adds a further word of explanation:

The man who loves his life will lose it, while the man who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. (John 12:25)

The one who seeks to save his life, his soul, is the one who loves himself, his own soulishness. He lives for himself, to please himself, to fulfill his own plans and ambitions. Such a one will lose his life to the devil because he does not truly belong to Christ.

The person who keeps his or her soul for eternal life, is the one *'who hates his life in this world!'* What does this mean. Surely Jesus, the Man of perfect love, is not suggesting that we live in venomous hatred of ourselves?

In the New Testament, there is love and hatred, which is the absence of love, and nothing in between! John makes this clear throughout his first epistle. For example, he says:

If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For everything in the world – the cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes and the boasting of what he has and does – comes not from the Father but from the world. The world and its desires pass away, but the man who does the will of God lives for ever' (1 John 2:15–17).

There is a great contrast between the light of God and the spiritual darkness of the world. In like manner, there is a direct contrast between the spirit and the flesh in the life of a believer. **The sons of God led by the Spirit of God, will**

not walk in the darkness of worldliness, seeking to please themselves and gratify the desires of their flesh. They want to do the will of God and are committed to follow Jesus as His disciples.

Paul says something similar when he speaks of the mind. The phrase ‘sinful nature’ here refers to the flesh!

Those who live according to the sinful nature have their minds set on what that nature desires; but those who live in accordance with the Spirit have their minds set on what the Spirit desires. The mind of sinful man is death, but the mind controlled by the Spirit is life and peace; the sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God’s law, nor can it do so. Those controlled by the sinful nature cannot please God. (Romans 8:5–8)

So Paul is saying the one who does not lose his soul to God (his mind being part of his natural soul life) cannot please God. His thought life is hostile to God. By contrast the one who has lost his soul to God, so that his spirit man can now dominate in his life, experiences life and peace. He is able to please God because he desires what the Holy Spirit desires for him.

Paul writes in a similar way to the Galatians and gives us an important key as to how to live as sons of God:

Live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature. (Galatians 5:16)

It is not simply a matter of fighting against our soulish desires when they conflict with what God desires for us. That is trying to overcome the self-life with the self-life, and ends in self-defeat! **It is by concentrating on the Spirit as He brings God’s Word to us and obeying what He says that enables us to please God – no matter what the cost in terms of having to deny what the soul would prefer to do.**

Too many Christians only obey the Lord when it pleases them to do so. They try to hide from His will if they consider it too costly! They want to live in a state of compromise, some of God’s will but still a considerable amount of their own desires to be satisfied! This is not what it means to live as a disciple of Jesus or a faithful son of God. To walk in the Spirit enables the fruit of the Spirit to be reproduced in our lives:

Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. (Galatians 5:22–23)

Paul points out that:

Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires. Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit. (Galatians 5:24–25)

James is even stronger in the way he states the same truths:

You adulterous people, don't you know that friendship with the world is hatred towards God? Anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God. (James 4:4)

To oppose God and His purposes is really evidence of pride; and '*God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble'. (v 6)* The outworking of that humility is to submit the life of the soul to the Spirit, to 'lose' your soul to God!

These apostles are not suggesting that we are to try and escape from the world. In order to be the witnesses God wants us to be in the world, we cannot live by the standards of the world. As those who belong to God's Kingdom we are to reflect the life of that Kingdom! So Jesus makes it clear:

Whoever serves me must follow me; and where I am, my servant also will be. My Father will honour one who serves me. (John 12:26)

We are sons who are happy to serve the Lord we love. So we are to hate the very idea that our self-life would be allowed to exert itself to oppose his purposes, a clear indication of pride on our part. Rather, **we are content that our natural soul lives be submitted to His Spirit in the spirit man, so that the life of His Spirit might flow through our soul lives, revealing the fruit of the Spirit, revealing the presence of Christ in us and the life of His Kingdom that God has placed within us!**

Those who love the Lord do not want their soul lives to be in rebellion against Him! In this way we understand something of what Jesus means when He says we are to 'hate' our soul lives in this world. To serve the Lord by denying ourselves and walking in the Spirit will not only bring eternal reward, but our heavenly Father will 'honour' us. Whatever is meant by that, it sounds good!

And worth whatever it might cost in terms of denying ourselves, taking us and our choices and following Jesus!

The Truly Radical Love

Luke was a medical doctor and in his version of the gospel, he emphasises the love and compassion that Jesus exhibited during His ministry. Yet it is this same Luke who records perhaps the most radical thing Jesus said about discipleship. This was addressed to the crowds, not to a few selected followers. If preachers want to avoid difficult verses, they will certainly avoid the following!

If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters – yes, even his own life – he cannot be my disciple. And anyone who does not carry his cross and follow me cannot be my disciple. (Luke 14:26–27)

The Man of love certainly does not mean that we should be filled with venomous hatred towards our loved ones. We could interpret these words by saying that we should hate the very idea of placing any love being placed above our love for Jesus Christ, including our love for those most precious to us and even the love we have for ourselves. This truth is certainly supported by similar words of Jesus recorded in Matthew's gospel:

Anyone who loves his father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves his son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and anyone who does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. (Matthew 10:37–39)

Here again the statement about the need to 'lose' our lives, our souls, is repeated. **Clearly, Jesus is saying that He has to be No. 1 at all times in our lives. Nothing and nobody must be given precedence over Him or His will, or we are not worthy of Him!**

This goes some way in helping us understand what Jesus meant in the passage from Luke, in which he uses the word 'hate'; but it does not fully explain why Jesus used that word.

To understand further, we must do a little more Greek study! Just as these are

different words translated by ‘life’ (*psuche* meaning our natural soul life and *zoe* referring to God’s life, eternal life, the life of God’s Spirit and of His Kingdom), so there are different Greek words translated by the word ‘love’. We will not attempt to look at all of these, but will concentrate on only two.

The verb *agapao,* like the noun, *agape*, refers to God’s love, the love with which He loves us and imparts to us by the Holy Spirit. This is not a love that is based on emotion, but is very practical in its outworking. It is love that is expressed in God giving to us His Son, in being prepared to serve us by suffering for us, and to bless us with the rich inheritance He has given us as His sons. That same *agape* love in us urges us to love, give, serve and bless the Lord and other people. The verb, *phileo,* is the affection of the soul and so involves our emotions to a considerable degree. Everybody, Christian or non- Christian experiences *phileo* affection for his or her loved ones. However, only those who have received God’s Spirit can love with God’s *agape* love.

There is a very interesting use of these two words when Jesus questions Peter during one of His resurrection appearances! He asked Simon Peter:

Do you truly love me more than these? (John 21:15)

The word in the Greek here is from the word *agapao,* to love with God’s love. Peter answered: *‘Yes, Lord, you know that I love you’.* But he uses the verb *phileo,* to love with human affection.

Jesus then repeated the question, ‘Do you love me?’, again using the word, *agapao*. When Peter replies he still uses the word *phileo*.

Jesus repeated the question a third time, but now He uses the word *phileo*. He has come down to Peter’s level! Peter was offended that Jesus should need to repeat the question for a third time. He answers:

Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you’. (John 21:17)

Again, he uses *phileo*. What is the point of these questions? Often they are interpreted as Jesus restoring Peter who has denied Him three times after His arrest. However, when Jesus forgives and restores He does this immediately; there would be no need to repeat this affirmation of love three times in order to be forgiven.

No, it seems that Peter was unable to love with the faithful consistency Jesus desired because he still only had *phileo* affection for Jesus. **He would not be able to love with the agape love of God until he had been filled with the Holy Spirit!** Then he would be able to love with his spirit man, not only with his soulish affection.

When Jesus speaks of loving those who are close to us affectionately I believe He is making the same contrast. He wants His followers to be able to love others with an entirely new quality of love that comes from the Spirit. What is born of the Spirit is consistent; human affections can change, sometimes dramatically. For example, a man and a woman are attracted to one another; they 'fall in love'. This is definitely *phileo*, not *agape*. However, if they are Christians and make the decision to marry, the Lord wants them to enter into a consistent, life-long commitment of love – *agape*.

During the early period of many marriages everything is fine. It is wonderful to be in love. But it is easy to love being in love, rather than entering into a life-time commitment to love a particular person. *Agape* is not dependent on emotions. **So if a Christian marriage goes through a difficult period, the couple's *agape* love for God and one another can enable them to work through the difficulties. They are not dependent only on *phileo* affection.** Worldly people say they no longer love one another. The romance is over and there is not necessarily any commitment to the marriage partner. So the couple decide to separate or divorce.

If the love in our lives originates from God's love in the spirit man, it will of course touch the emotions and every other part of the soul life. So Christians will feel love for one another; the affections will obviously be involved to a high degree. But their love and commitment to one another will not be based simply on affections that can change, as with the inconsistency that Peter showed in his love for Jesus before he was filled with the Spirit.

What has been said about marriage extends to other relationships with many believers. All too often one hears of close friendships between people turning sour, leading to hurt and divisions. This could be expected in the world; but Christians are supposed to be in covenant commitment to one another. Their love should be based on *agape* therefore, not simply *phileo*. They are to pray and work through their differences without severing their relationships with one another. They are to forgive and not allow a spirit of offense to take control of

their lives.

So why does Jesus talk about hating mother, father, wife, child, brother, sister, even your own soul life? Because He wants us to hate the idea that our relationships should be based on unreliable phileo. **He wants the consistent love of God to undergird all our relationships.** He intends the love of God to flow out of our spirits as rivers of living water, rather than to be dependent on *phileo* affection! How many families do you hear of where there are rifts, estrangements, often people not talking to one another for years, because they only have *phileo* and do not possess God's love?

When God's love predominates in our lives, we love Him, not simply with soulish feelings of affection, but with loving obedience to His Word. Jesus said:

If you love me, you will obey what I command. (John 14:15)

When He promised the imminent coming of the gift of the Holy Spirit, He gave the disciples the new commandment: *'Love each other as I have loved you.' (John 15:12)* He loves us with *agape*, not *phileo*! So we are to love one another with that consistent *agape* love, which means we are concerned for the welfare of those we love above our own welfare! We are ready to serve and give to them in any way we can in order to bless them and encourage them. Jesus said:

Greater love has no one than this, that he lays down his love for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command. (John 15:13–14)

These things Jesus told the disciples *'that my joy may be in you and your joy may be complete'. (John 15:11)*

I can testify to the fact that when Jesus is allowed to have first place in your life, your marriage and family, all concerned prosper as a result. The children will love the Lord with *agape* and will remain constant in their devotion to Him because the right foundation has been laid in their lives. If the Lord does not have first place in their parents' lives, the children will be given the impression that He does not have to be first in their lives either. We all learn from the example we are given!

Sons of God are to be led by the Spirit of God; so they will not be content to love with soulish affection, but will want the love of God to flow through their soul lives and out of them as a river of life that will touch and embrace

those they know and meet. They are intent on expressing the life of God's Kingdom and not to live dependent on their own resources!

No Longer A Slave

In the parable the older brother had a slave mentality and so did not claim his inheritance as a son. The Lord wants to see every believer delivered from a slave mentality, so that the principles of faith and love (*agape*) underlie all he or she does. Paul says of our condition before conversion to Christ:

'We were in slavery under the basic principles of the world'. (Galatians 4:3)

But God sent His Son *'that we might receive the full rights of sons'. (v 5)* He explains further:

Because you are sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, 'Abba Father'. So you are no longer a slave, but a son; and since you are a son, God has made you also an heir. (Galatians 4:6–7)

To live as a son of God is first and foremost to relate to God as your Father. The slave has to obey without any reward and has no right of inheritance. The sons of God are co-heirs with Christ of all that our heavenly Father has to give!

It is encouraging that because we share inheritance with Him, Jesus, our Saviour and Lord, is not ashamed to call us His brothers. As sons we are His brothers:

He says, 'I will declare your name to my brothers.' (Hebrews 2:12)

Through His sacrifice for us on the cross, we have access into the Holy of Holies, the very throne of God. We can draw near to God and know Him as our Father. Indeed, Jesus tells us to address Him as such when we pray. He does not tell us to call Him 'Dad', for the word 'Abba', although familiar, contains the sense of great respect. So when Jesus prayed, He spoke to God as His 'Righteous Father' and 'Holy Father'. And He tells us to pray to our 'heavenly Father'.

We must never forget that our Father is the One who is above all and beyond all He has made. We are to have a profound respect for Him when we worship and pray to Him. Over-familiarity will breed contempt. We will imagine that it does not matter if we disregard or disobey His word. After all, sons often disobey

their dads in the world.

God is not like any other Father. He is One who will never fail any of His sons, always reliable and trustworthy. Although we are to treat Him with profound respect, He still desires to have an intimate, close relationship with all His children. Jesus said:

If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching. My Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him. (John 14:23)

Here you see the profound respect, expressed in obedience to the word the Father sent the Son to give us, and yet tremendous benefits that result. The Father and the Son come to make their home with the obedient ones. It seems the Father has a special love for the obedient!

This is part of the vision God wants us to have for our lives, that the Father and Son feel at home within us because of our desire to please them and to live for their glory! Jesus said: *'He who loves me will be loved by my Father'. (John 14:21)* And the Father will answer us when we pray to Him! When we bear fruit by fulfilling Jesus' call on our lives, *'the Father will give you whatever you ask in my name'. (John 15:16)* This is not an isolated promise:

I tell you the truth, my Father will give you whatever you ask in my name. (John 16:23)

To be able to pray in Jesus' name, gives us the same access to God in prayer as Jesus Himself enjoyed while here on earth. He actually wants the world to see that we receive so much from God in answered prayer that it is clear to non-believers that the heavenly Father loves us in the same way in which He loves the Son. (see John 17:23) Jesus even prays that the Father's own love for the Son might be in us!

So our Father is the Almighty God, yet He does not want to remain distant from us. He wants to work in us by His Spirit transforming us into the likeness of His first-born Son, Jesus! Sin and compromise do not properly belong in the lives of those whom God has made his sons. Jesus referred to the righteous as 'sons of the light'. And Paul says:

Since we belong to the day, let us be self-controlled, putting on faith and love as a breastplate, and the hope of salvation as a helmet. (1 Thessalonians 5:8)

It is not God's purpose for His sons to experience His wrath, but to receive the salvation made possible through our Lord Jesus Christ. He wants us to 'live together with Him', both now and eternally in His glory!

As sons of God we are to be peacemakers and reconciling men to God through the gospel of the Kingdom, and to one another in His love!

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God. (Matthew 5:9)

Because love and faith are to be the foundation of their lives, Jesus says the sons of the heavenly Father are to love their enemies even, and to pray for those who persecute them! (see Matthew 5:4–45)

These are the two pillars in the lives of the sons of God: trusting in their heavenly Father through Jesus Christ, and demonstrating His love to all and sundry - to one another, to their neighbours, to their enemies and those who persecute them!

It is obviously a great privilege to be a son of God, and you cannot belong to Him unless you are one! But the great privilege brings with it a keen sense of responsibility, for those to whom God gives much, of them He expects much! He expects them to be gracious and merciful because He has been gracious and merciful to them in making them His sons. Their reward for faithfulness to His will shall be great, He promises, even if obedience is sometimes going to prove costly!

There is to be a clear separation from a life of pleasing self, compromising with sin and adopting a worldly life-style. When speaking of believers being God's temple, Paul quotes from the prophecies of Isaiah and Ezekiel:

For we are the temple of the living God. As God has said: "I will live with them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they will be my people." "Therefore come out from them and be separate, says the Lord. Touch no unclean thing, and I will receive you. I will be a Father to you, and you will be my sons and daughter, says the Lord Almighty." (2 Corinthians 6:16–18)

In other words, the sons of God are called to be a holy people, those whom God has chosen for Himself and has set apart for His purposes in the world. It is for this reason that He has given us such a rich inheritance in Christ.

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in His sight. In love he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will. (Ephesians 1:3–5)

It is wonderful to know we are sons, not through any natural process, but by adoption. God the Father chose us to be adopted as His sons, to belong to Christ and to live in Him. He chose us to be holy and blameless in His sight. This is only possible because we have been cleansed from *all* our sins through the shedding of Jesus Christ's blood for us, and because He has chosen to raise us with Christ.

All this has been His pleasure and will; it is the outworking of His love. Everything God does is part of His divine purpose. It is humbling to realise we are part of that great design He has been outworking throughout the ages and that will come to a climax when Jesus Christ comes again.

As sons of God this should give us a sense of destiny and should help us to realise that fulfilling His plan for our lives really matters to Him. He has saved us and made us His sons to fulfill His purpose for our lives now, and then to enjoy eternity in the glory of heaven with Him.

So we are sons, but sons who are happy to serve the Lord. When Jesus said to His disciples: *'I no longer call you servants'*, He did not mean they were no longer to serve Him. No, their position and relationship would no longer be servants, but friends because He had made known to them all He had learned from His Father.

So we are sons who are to live as friends of God, happy to serve Him by fulfilling His purpose for our lives. This is another way of saying that we are happy to obey His commands and do so out of our love for Him.

As we saw with the parable, Jesus does not intend us to waste our inheritance, nor does He want us to be like the older son who was so busy serving, he did not think and believe as a son. God has given us this rich inheritance, every spiritual blessing in heavenly places, so that we might serve Him in the good of all He has done for us and showered upon us through His grace! He chose us to be His sons, but Jesus also said:

I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit that will last. Then the Father will give you whatever you ask in my name. This is my command: Love each other. (John 15:16-17)

The Lord has invested much in us, and He wants to see a return on that investment! However, this can happen, not only by being in a relationship of love with Him, but also with other sons of God.

To be a son of God is to be part of the family of God, and it is essential to love the other members of that family. From the moment we became sons of God we were grafted into the Body of Christ, along with all the other sons of God! So we belong to the Lord, but we also belong to one another. **Whatever we do to the other sons of God we do to Him!**

I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me. (Matthew 25:40)

Because He has chosen *all* who are His sons, the Lord takes it very personally when we do not treat others in love, in the way we would treat Him!

Our love needs to go beyond love for other believers. Jesus spoke of how our eternal reward in heaven will be affected by the way we have treated the hungry, thirsty, strangers, the poor, the sick and those in prison! He wants His love and grace to pour out of our lives to all, especially to those in need.

We are sons who are happy to serve, but not with a slave mentality, but out of true love for God as our Father! This should cause us no problems if we recognize that our lives are not our own; that we have been bought with the blood of Jesus Christ and are to glorify Him in our bodies, in what we do with our entire lives. We belong to Him, to His family and to one another!

How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God. And that is what we are! (1 John 3:1)

As the children of God we are to walk in righteousness, in ways pleasing to our Lord.

Dear children, do not let anyone lead you astray. He who does what is right is righteous, just as he is righteous. (1 John 3:7)

To do what is right, is to love with the love God has given us by His Spirit. It is impossible to love while judging, criticizing or condemning those we are called to love. John warns: *'Anyone who does not love remains in death'. (1 John 3:14)* And then he shows what love requires:

This is how we know what love is; Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers. (1 John 3:16)

To lay down your life is to live for others rather than for yourself. John is teaching that the only way to live for God is to live for others, the principle he learned from Jesus Himself. This is how He lived as the first-born Son of God; and this is how the other sons of God are called to live. Because we have such a rich inheritance from God as His sons, He has provided all the resources needed to fulfill the Kingdom life-style He asks of us. This is faith working through love!

The Lord wants to see His Kingdom established in the midst of the worldliness in which we have to live out the gospel. **The Kingdom of God on earth is an alternative society where His children are seen to love one another, each to be living for the others, giving to and receiving from one another in whatever ways are appropriate to see God's will fulfilled.** He desires to see His children living in love, forgiving one another wherever necessary, caring for one another, being of one heart and mind. Where such unity exists He commands blessing!

So we are to be sons of God, living in the good of our inheritance, happy to serve the Lord by serving one another; living for Him by living for one another; blessing Him by seeking to bless others; giving to Him by giving to others!

And Yet Slaves

We have seen that the Lord delivers us from a slave mentality; we are to see ourselves and think of ourselves as sons, not slaves. Sons that are happy to serve! And yet, still more, sons that rejoice to be slaves. Does this sound confusing? It need not be! Strange as it may seem, Jesus talked of His disciples as slaves. He said:

Whoever wants to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many. (Mark 10:43-45)

To understand what Jesus is saying here we have to remember that in the time of His ministry most servants were slaves. A master would literally buy and own his servants. They would be at his service day and night and would be given any task the master chose to assign them.

Jesus uses a powerful illustration to teach His disciples about true servanthood or 'slavery'. He does this by asking them three questions.

Suppose one of you had a servant ploughing or looking after the sheep. Would he say to the servant when he comes in from the field, 'Come along now and sit down to eat?' (Luke 17:7)

The disciples would probably have laughed at this point. What a ludicrous suggestion! Of course not, because the servants in the fields would have been bond-servants or slaves. This is very different from today. Someone would be hired for a specific job and would be paid for it. (There was also casual labour in Jesus' time, as we see from the parable of the labourers in the vineyard.) Once their day's work was done, the rest of their time would be their own. They would feel that they had earned their pay for the day and then could rest. Not so with a bond-servant or slave!

As is clear from the question Jesus asked His disciples, it would be ludicrous for a slave to imagine that he would either be paid for his service or that he could demand to rest after his day's work in the fields. No, he would know it was his

duty and responsibility to first ensure that his master was fed and cared for. This takes us to the second question Jesus asked.

Would he not rather say, Prepare my supper, get yourself ready and wait on me while I eat and drink; after that you may eat and drink? (Luke 17:8)

At this the disciples would have nodded in agreement. 'Well, of course', would have been their reaction. That is what is expected of a servant or slave. The third question Jesus asked is even more astounding to our modern way of thinking:

Would he thank the servant because he did what he was told to do? (Luke 17:9)

No, of course not! The servant would not expect thanks, praise or recognition for what he had done. He had merely fulfilled his duty and done what was expected of him.

What was Jesus' purpose in asking these three questions? He was preparing the way to teach the disciples an important lesson concerning their attitude towards serving Him as their Lord and Master.

So you also, when you have done everything you were told to do, should say, 'We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty.' (Luke 17:10)

Jesus is talking about motive here. As sons of God we are happy to serve Him, to acknowledge that we are slaves of God who have a responsibility to serve our Lord and Master with good, willing hearts. We are not looking for applause, recognition, praise from God or man. We do not have a hired-hand mentality, imagining that we only have to live as sons of God or servants for part of the time, thinking that the rest of our time is our own.

No, to be a son of God means I am always a son, twenty four hours a day, seven days a week. Jesus has not hired me as a part-time worker. I can only be a son of God because He purchased me for God with His own blood. I am not my own. I was bought for a price. I am called to glorify God in what I do with my body, with my entire life.

My attitude should be, says Jesus, that even when I have done everything expected of me by the Lord, I am still an unworthy or unprofitable servant. I have not earned the right to anything; I have only done what was expected of me.

In love, my Father will want to care for me by providing whatever I need. But His gifts are still the outworking of His grace, of what He gives freely to one who deserves nothing from God!

The idea of serving to win recognition or promotion in the Church is totally foreign to Jesus' thinking and teaching!

Does all this mean that God is a hard taskmaster? No, He is our Father and we are His sons who have a great inheritance as co-heirs with Christ. But every part of that inheritance is a work of God's grace. None of it has been earned, nor can we ever say that we deserve such an inheritance! Paul sums up the right attitude when he says:

When I preach the gospel, I cannot boast, for I am compelled to preach. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel! If I preach voluntarily, I have a reward; if not voluntarily, I am simply discharging the trust committed to me. What then is my reward? Just this: that in preaching the gospel I may offer it free of charge, and so not make use of my rights in preaching it. Though I am free and belong to no man, I make myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. (1 Corinthians 9:16-19)

What Paul says here about preaching is true in principle of any way in which the Lord calls us to serve Him.

We are not to boast of what the Lord does in or through us, nor of our privilege in being His sons. The way in which we serve Him faithfully is only to be expected of His sons. Our reward is to know that we have pleased the Lord through our willing obedience, that we have been found faithful in doing what He asked and expected of us. The privilege is all ours! The privilege that we are sons, called to serve our Lord and Master! For the truth is that God is at the same time both Father and Lord to all who belong to Him.

Many sons of God seem to live under the misapprehension that God exists to serve them, rather than understand that they are called to a lifetime of service to Him!

Jesus has been speaking of attitude. The fact is that God does much to encourage us, to show His appreciation of faithfulness; and He loves to reward obedience. But everything He does is the work of His grace; giving to those who deserve nothing! By definition a gift is only the work of grace when given to one who is

totally undeserving! And John testifies of his experience of Jesus:

From the fullness of his grace we have all received one blessing after another. (John 1:16)

Every blessing from the Lord is the work of His grace. **Everything He gives us as the sons of God is the outworking of His grace, the way in which He expresses His love towards us.**

It is a supreme work of His grace that we are actually His sons in the first place! It is His grace that has made us co-heirs with Christ and has given us expectation of a rich inheritance in heaven. As Peter says:

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade – kept in heaven for you. (1 Peter 1:3-4)

Our new birth as sons of God is a gift, Peter says, as is the heavenly inheritance that awaits us. Meanwhile we are sons of God, who are no longer slaves to the devil or to religious legalism or to the world; but those who freely and willingly choose to serve, to be bondslaves of Christ. **Our aim: to please Him by fulfilling the purpose He had in making us His sons! To be faithful in our service here on earth, in whatever capacity He calls us, and then to take our place in heaven that He has gone ahead to prepare for us.**

So, Peter described himself as a *'slave and apostle of Jesus Christ'*. (2 Peter 1:1 Literal translation of the Greek).

The truth is that whatever the nature of a person's ministry – apostle, prophet, evangelist, pastor, teacher, leader, miracle-worker, administrator, helper – he or she is at the same time a son of God who is happy to be a slave of Christ!

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