

'For God so Loved the World' – Part 4*'Christ in Us'*

by Rev. Robert Griffith

I have a ministry colleague in the United States, Dr Ken Blue, who has nine children, all of whom were home schooled by his wife and back at the beginning of this amazing challenge, both parents made a commitment to God and to each other that their highest priority was to teach their children how to read and how to love and be loved - then they would be a success in everything they do. Ken and Patty Blue firmly believed that these two things would give their children the educational, emotional and spiritual foundation on which they could build any life they chose.

Now of course they were taught many other things but teaching them to read and develop a love for reading and teaching them to receive and give love, undergirded everything Patty said and did as she shaped her nine children and prepared them for life. That was many years ago now and all of those nine children have moved into their adult years and they all love the Lord and are all actively involved in the mission of Christ. Last time I checked, two of them are serving in overseas mission work; most of them have university degrees, at least one has a Master's Degree and is studying for his Doctorate. But above and beyond all that, each of these children have learned how to receive and give love and that is by far the most important foundation we can lay in every life, especially the lives of our children and grandchildren.

As I have explored this whole area of love over the years, I have gained a much clearer picture of what the Church of Jesus Christ can and should be and, even more than that, I have seen what the Church which Jesus is building really looks like and is becoming. So when people embrace the gift of God's grace in Christ and are brought into the life of the Church I don't want any of them to ever hear, *"Well, now that you're a Christian, here's a list of important things that you need to do."* For hundreds of thousands of believers entering the Church, the first message they heard after *"Welcome to Church,"* was often something like:

"Well now that you're in the Church, you have to learn how to read the Bible; you have to learn how to pray and witness and tithe; you have to show up to all the meetings; you have to stop swearing; you have stop smoking; you have to stop hanging around with those friends who don't share your Christian values ... etc."

If they were not told they 'had to' do these things, the unspoken message was still clear that these are the spiritual disciplines they 'should' embrace if they wanted to be a faithful Christian who pleases God. I've seen the lists. Some of them are printed on the back of the very Gospel tracts that are used to lead people to Christ and the message is clear: *"Welcome to Church - now here's a list of behaviours, disciplines and service we (and God) expect of you as a disciple of Christ and a member of the Church."* Many of us have been told that salvation is a free gift from God, but sanctification is our job and it requires discipline, sacrifice and a lot of hard work. God gets us through the gate, free in Christ, but we have to take it from there!

The term 'sanctification' simply means 'growing and maturing in Christ'. Some preachers teach that it's what *'working out our salvation with fear and trembling'* means. Now this concept of salvation and sanctification somehow being separate - one being solely the work of God and the other being primarily our responsibility through discipline, sacrifice and hard work - is still widely taught and accepted in the Church even though it cannot be found anywhere in the New Testament.

When you study the New Testament and examine the Greek and look at the theological principles outlined there, you will not find a single verse to support one of the most widely held views about living the Christian life. I remember being told and reading in reputable Christian journals and books, that my salvation and my sanctification are totally separate activities. One is God's job and the other is my job, in partnership with Holy Spirit. *'Grace gets you into the Kingdom of God, then through spiritual disciplines and hard work, we advance the Kingdom and please God.'* I was given that verse in James which says faith without works is dead, and that was always interpreted as an imperative for me to add good works to my faith so my faith would be effective, alive and real.

Many years later, I studied the Greek in that same passage in James and discovered it effectively says the exact opposite to how many people interpret it. What that passage in James really means is simple: If your faith is genuine, if your faith is in God (not in faith itself) then the good works *will* follow as the fruit of the life that is within you. The good works, spiritual disciplines and the activities and ministries we commit to in the life of the Church are supposed to be the outflow of the love and presence of God in our lives. Otherwise they are dead religious works. It really is that simple.

Now please understand what I'm saying here (and not saying): There is nothing wrong with all the spiritual disciplines. It is the source, the power, the motivation and the focus of those disciplines which can be completely wrong and very damaging to us as disciples and damaging to the ministry of the whole Church. There is actually only one thing that a new believer really should to do first and foremost and it's exactly the same thing I would exhort mature believers to do also, and that is to become rooted and grounded in God's love. That's the first and the highest priority - before anything else comes. We need to take whatever time is necessary to establish that deep foundation in our lives by word and deed and wait for it to set. Then we can build whatever we want on that foundation!

So I guess if I had any vision for our Church it would be this: I would like our Church to not be known primarily for its preacher and his sermons; I would like our Church not to be known primarily for our ministries and the things we do in serving others; I would like our Church not to be known primarily for our great worship. My hope, my desire and my daily prayer is that we become a people who really know and experience the love of God – a people who are filled to the measure of all the fullness of God – Who is love. Then, and only then, can that love, God's love, flow through us into the lives of those around us in our Church and in our community. Until we minister and serve out of the fullness of God's love, the reservoir of God's love, we do so in our own strength and all that will amount to is more burned-out believers and a shrinking Church.

When Jesus walked among us years ago, He was asked one day what is the most important commandment and He bounced right back with those all too familiar words: *"Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul and mind and love your neighbour as yourself."* Now please, I beg you, don't race off after this sermon and beat yourself up trying harder to be better at loving God and loving people. Don't go away saying, *"Robert hit the nail on the head. I really need to get better at giving and receiving love."* In Jesus' name, please don't even think that way! It is that kind of works-based thinking that has bound up millions of sincere, well-intentioned Christians across the world in a spirit of religion! There is only one way to get good at loving God and loving people - only one way - and that is to first receive and bask in the love of God. God is love and God is radiating His love to us constantly, but unless we open ourselves up to God and other people as vehicles of God's love, we will never truly experience His love in the way He intended. We must receive God's love before we can be channels of God's love and that is a daily reality.

You and I are fallen, sinful, rebellious and broken humans. We have nothing to offer God, nothing to offer the Church and nothing to offer the world. We are empty, until God fills us with His presence and power. That's why John told us in his first letter:

1 John 4:10 *“This is love, not that we love God but that He first loved us.”*

So if you want a really simple goal for life and a priority for our Church for the days ahead, how does this sound: **Rediscover God’s love and be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God, Who is love.** Then, and only then, out of that abundance, out of that overflow of God’s love, can we be a blessing to others in whatever ministries we feel equipped for and passionate about at this point in our journey.

Do you remember the WWJD movement in the 1990’s? It began in America and spread through our country as well. Young people in particular wore these WWJD bracelets everywhere. WWJD stands for *‘What would Jesus do?’* and the intention was that the constant reminder of this question in our daily lives was supposed to help us ponder what Jesus would do in any particular situation. This then prompted us to go and do likewise. That sounds like a pretty good way to live, right? Well, millions of WWJD bracelets later, the Church is weaker and less effective than ever. So what went wrong? Did we just lack the courage and commitment to act, once we worked out what Jesus would do if He were here? Or were we asking the wrong question completely and was that entire movement theologically flawed from the beginning? You could probably guess my answer.

If, as the WWJD marketing campaign suggested, we think that we should pause at every key decision point in our lives and try to imagine what the Jesus of the gospels would do if He were here now and then imitate that, then that is a load of theological bunkum which will only produce powerless, frustrated, ineffective believers who inadvertently bring themselves and those they influence back under old covenant law. Let me explain it this way. Who am I? I need to start there first. I am an English-speaking, Australian Christian; born in the twentieth century, living in the 21st Century. I am married, with five children and eight grandchildren and two more on the way; I live in a modern, technologically advanced western society.

Now by contrast, the Jesus of the gospels was an Aramaic speaking Jew, born in the first century; He was never married; had no children or grandchildren; He lived in a relatively primitive ancient culture and He was many years younger than I am now when He got himself killed. Now the only way those two human beings could be more different or more disconnected from each other is if one of us was a female!

Now I am sure that if Jesus the man showed up today in Australia and not in first century Palestine, then we may have something to work with here and if He did, I can guarantee the Gospels would be written very differently. But He didn’t. So I cannot even begin to imagine what someone born over 2000 years ago in a different culture, a different society, a different religious environment might do if He was stuck in peak hour traffic in Sydney at 5pm - because Sydney didn’t exist in Jesus’ day, nor did cars, nor did airplanes, nor did the crazy lifestyle and culture and worldview of today. It’s like me trying to imagine what my great, great, great, great, great, great, great, great grandfather would do if he were here today sitting at my computer, looking at the internet. That’s a nonsense question! Now you may be thinking, ‘Well that’s not what people mean here. They are not asking what would Jesus the man do in this situation, they are talking about Jesus the Christ. WWJD is not, *“What would Jesus the carpenter do?”* It is supposed to mean, *“What would Jesus the Messiah do?”*’ Ok. point taken, but does that make it better? Does that make any more sense? No! It makes it worse because it’s a load of theological nonsense. Asking, *‘What would Jesus do if He were here?’* suggests that Jesus isn’t already here and it suggests that Jesus has not already done everything.

In the Kingdom of Heaven, where we live and move and have our being in Christ, through Christ and for Christ, the reality is that every single situation you and I will face has already been dealt with by Jesus! Every challenge you face in your life has already been overcome by Christ and in Christ.

Every problem which presents itself today or tomorrow in your life has already been solved by Christ and in Christ and He is present now and active in our lives through His Spirit to bring the fruit of His finished work into our lives. **We are not called to imitate Jesus, we are called to surrender to Christ.**

So maybe it's time we started a new movement and manufactured some new bracelets with the acronym WHJD: *What Has Jesus Done?* The answer to that question will be: EVERYTHING. Your salvation, your entrance into the Kingdom of God, your sanctification, your growth and maturity in your faith, your spiritual gifts and passion for ministry, your fruitfulness and joy in ministry, your faith, your courage, your healing, your wisdom and the revelation of God Himself ... it has ALL been secured for you already, in Christ, through Christ and for Christ. When Jesus hung on that cross and said, "*It is finished,*" He really meant **it is finished.** God's reconciling work is complete, from God's perspective and in God's kingdom. Now you and I and all mankind are invited to believe, receive and walk in that reality. Believe the truth that Jesus has done it all for us and receive the fullness of God's love and grace and presence and power.

Then, and only then, out of that abundance, out of that overwhelming experience of the love and grace and the presence of God, will flow faith, prayer, a passion for the Bible, a heart for people, a commitment to serve; your giving will increase in all areas of your life; your lifestyle and values will become more and more conformed to Christ in you, the hope of glory ... and all of that will be the fruit of what you have received from God, Who is love. None of that will be religious duty or well-intentioned good works done in the flesh. It will be the fruit of the Life that is within you, the Love that has been lavished upon you. Every imaginable spiritual discipline will emerge in your life with increasing measure without you straining, groaning or flogging yourself with guilt and shame. It will simply emerge as the fruit of God's presence in your life, the natural and automatic outworking of God's love deep within you.

Let me ask you something. Have you ever walked through an orchard when the fruit is forming on the trees? I grew up in Orange (named after Prince William of Orange, not the fruit!). Orange is located on the central tablelands of NSW and when I was a child our city was surrounded by orchards. Cherries and apples were our primary crops. For decades we had an annual 'Cherry Blossom Festival' and the main street would be closed with people lined up five deep down both sides to watch dozens of floats and displays parade past for an hour; some bright young girl would be crowned 'Cherry Blossom Queen' and there was a market day, a town hall concert and a huge ball. As the years passed, we produced more apples than cherries and the festival stopped and Orange adopted the name: *The Apple City.*

So I have been in a lot of orchards and there is this amazing miracle which happens in an orchard when the fruit is forming. When the trees are young, they are just trees, with wonderful leaves and a beautiful shape and they certainly look great all in rows across a whole orchard. But they are just time-consuming, money-swallowing ornaments taking up space - until the day arrives when the fruit starts to form. What a miracle that is and when you are there, standing in the middle of that orchard watching that abundant, rich, succulent fruit appear before your eyes from nowhere, guess what you can hear - if you go right up close to one of those trees? Guess what you can hear? Absolutely nothing! Isn't that a miracle? There's no grunting, no groaning and no straining on the part of the tree. The fruit just forms. If the tree is well fed and watered, the fruit will always form and it will always be rich and succulent. If the tree is healthy it doesn't have to exert any extra effort to produce the fruit - it just forms automatically because that is the God-ordained purpose for that tree.

Hello? Are you getting this? Are you still with me? Just as a healthy, well fed and watered tree in an orchard will always produce rich, succulent fruit, so too will a healthy, well fed and watered disciple of Christ always produce rich, succulent fruit in their life and within the life of the Church.

Trees don't have to 'do more or try harder' or discipline themselves or beat themselves into submission to bear fruit. Trees just need to be still and know that the fruit is already within them – just as their Creator intended. If they are healthy, the fruit will always appear, in season – it's guaranteed.

If we are not producing rich, abundant fruit as trees planted in God's orchard, God's kingdom, it can only be because we are not healthy trees receiving the right nourishment; we are not being fed the correct food. What is our food? Jesus told us a very long time ago and His words are recorded in John's gospel.

John 6:27-35 *(Jesus said) "Do not work for food that spoils, but for food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. For on him God the Father has placed his seal of approval."*

Then they asked him, "What must we do to do the works God requires?"

Jesus answered, "The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent."

So they asked him, "What sign then will you give that we may see it and believe you? What will you do? Our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written: 'He gave them bread from heaven to eat.'"

Jesus said to them, "Very truly I tell you, it is not Moses who has given you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is the bread that comes down from heaven and gives life to the world."

"Sir," they said, "always give us this bread."

Then Jesus declared, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty."

What is our water? Listen to Jesus' words to the Samaritan woman at the well all those years ago:

John 4:13-14 *"Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life."*

The source of our food and drink is Christ in us. It is the gift of God's Son, our Lord and Saviour and His indwelling presence and love within us which is the source of all life, all power, all gifts, all effectiveness and all fruit in the Kingdom of Heaven. We don't need to imitate Jesus or strive to be like Jesus – we simply need to surrender and let the Spirit of God transform us day by day, minute by minute, choice by choice . . . into the image of our Lord and Saviour.

Come, Holy Spirit, Come – fill us to the measure with the fullness of God, fill us with Your Presence, fill us with Your love, fill us with Your life! Amen.