

A DISCIPLE'S CHARACTER - GOD-LIKE OR GODLY?

2 PETER 3 v 8-14

Introduction

We have heard a lot over recent months about different disciples and how they showed their faith, what marked them out as different or made them just like us. Each was unique, but they had much in common, namely their faith in Christ as the Son of God, their Saviour. Today I want to look at something else that should be common to all Christians, a disciple's character.

In my title I have asked the question, god-like or godly? And you may now be wondering, what's the difference? To be honest, in many respects there is no difference, but there are differences in some very important respects.

Think of Augustus Caesar; he was a man elevated by the Romans to the status of a god. Whether they would admit it or not, Muslims venerate Mohammed as if he is a god, otherwise how else could they consider something to be blasphemy against him, and to consider it to be so serious a crime? So there is a danger of people being considered divine, or god-like, when they are in fact still mortal, sinful men.

For us Christians, although we have so much in Christ and from Him, He has not given to us His divinity. Therefore we should not consider ourselves to be divine.

In reality, most of us are not going to be considered divine by other people so is this relevant? I think it is because the very first temptation and sin were about being like God.

Satan's Temptation of Eve

When Satan approached Eve to tempt her, behind everything else was his aim to get her to want to be like God, **Genesis 3 v 1-5**. So wanting to be like God in some way is the start of sin. We put ourselves in a place which is on a level with, or instead of, God. That is what sin is at heart, not staying in the right place in relationship to Him. The consequence of that first sin is that we lost the opportunity to eat from the tree of life, **Genesis 3 v22**.

Usurping God's place in this way can then lead to us wanting His power, His authority, His glory, His world. What we stop wanting is His rule in our lives. We make our own declaration of independence. Even as Christians we can want God's power in our lives, not to do great things for God but to be seen to do great things. We may risk seeking the honour that belongs to God alone.

There are, however, instances in Scripture where we are exhorted to be like God, to be like Jesus, and it is to some of these that we will turn shortly. To start, though, the first thing to remember is that we are to have the same attitude as Christ Jesus, who did not consider equality with God as something to be grasped, **Philippians 2 v 5-6**. His attitude was contrary to that which Satan urged Eve to exhibit.

Reasons for a Disciple's Character

Before we consider a disciple's character, look again at that passage in **2 Peter 3 v 8-14**. There is a context to the character that is required of us, and that context is that the day of the Lord is coming. Judgement is coming; the earth as we know it will be completely changed and made new. Peter tells us that, in view of this, we ought to be a certain kind of person, we should have a particular character. We ought to live holy and godly lives. Not god-like, but godly.

If we don't want to face eternal destruction then we need to be prepared, to be ready to live in the home of righteousness. To do that we need to be righteous, spotless, blameless. If this is the only type of character that will survive that overwhelming destruction and reshaping of creation then that is the type of character that we must have. No ifs, no buts, no doubts. That is the type of character that we, as Jesus' disciples, must show.

We must be godly, not out of relationship with God but in relationship and at peace with Him. Sin must be gone from our lives. The three characteristics of a disciple that I want to look at all relate to our relationship to God and our relationship to sin, and are all mentioned by Peter in our main reading.

Being Godly in Holiness

The first godly characteristic we are exhorted to display is the first item in the list from our reading in 2 Peter. We should show godliness through holiness. In his first letter, Peter tells us to be holy as God is holy, **1 Peter 1 v 13-16**.

In English, 'as' can be taken two ways. Firstly, in the sense of 'because'. Be holy because God is holy. The second sense is 'in the same way as'. Be holy in the same way that God is holy, be like God in holiness. Both senses come through in Peter's writings.

Why does holiness come first on my list, and not love? In Isaiah's vision of God, **Isaiah 6 v 3**, the seraphs were calling to each other "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty". And when we see those glimpses of heaven in the book of Revelation, we notice that the creatures surrounding the throne of God are not declaring His love, they were not saying "Love, love, love is the Lord God Almighty" (though elsewhere we are told that God is love, **1 John 4 v 8**), rather they were declaring His holiness. "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty", **Revelation 4 v 8**. The heavenly creatures perhaps do not experience God's love as we do, but if God's holiness is what the Holy Spirit chose to reveal as he inspired John (who is the apostle who wrote most about God's love) to write the book of Revelation then it must be important to God. It therefore ought to be important to us.

If we are to be holy then we need to know what holiness is. Holiness is not being a stained glass saint, it is not walking round with a halo about your head. God's holiness is a complete separateness from sin; there is no sin in Him, He cannot think sinful thoughts, He cannot act sinfully. Nor can sin enter His presence. I reverently believe that there are things that are impossible for God, and they are for Him to sin, to tolerate sin, to be untrue to His holiness. This is why Jesus cried out from the cross, "My God, my God, why have You forsaken me?",

Matthew 27 v 46. It is because the sin Jesus bore on the cross, your sin and my sin, cut Him off from God's presence. God abhors sin and judges it worthy of condemnation and destruction. Mercifully He is patient and does not bring that judgement to bear on the world yet, and if we are Jesus' disciples then Jesus has already borne that judgement on our behalf. So we must be holy as He is holy.

For the Jews of the old testament, something set apart for God's use was deemed to be holy. But even the High Priest, who was set apart to serve God, had to go through many cleansing and purifying rituals and make various sacrifices before he could come into God's presence in the Holy of Holies. And he could only do that once a year. Our relationship to God as disciples of Jesus is different from that of the High priest, but that change in relationship is all due to the perfect and sinless obedience of the perfect sacrifice, Jesus Christ. God's standards of holiness have not changed.

So for us as disciples, we can combine these two aspects of holiness. We are set apart for God's service, freed from slavery to sin, in order to live lives that are without sin, abhorring sin and thinking, speaking and acting without sin.

But if we still sin on a daily basis, how can we come into God's presence day by day?

Holiness has two realities, the reality of our standing before God and the reality of our daily lives. The reality of our standing before God is that we have been made holy, **Hebrews 10 v 10**, but the reality of our daily lives is that we are being made ready to be in His presence for ever.

A second reason for putting holiness first is that I fear that, if we do not emphasise the need to be holy as God is holy, we risk developing weak and ill-prepared disciples. Without the right focus then we and they will not please God.

A third reason to focus on developing holiness is that, as the writer to the Hebrews warns, without holiness we will not see God, **Hebrews 12 v 14**.

I firmly believe that unless the church takes holiness seriously then we will not see great spiritual growth in people and the church will not have a great impact on the world around. We have recently returned from a lovely holiday in Lewis, and in some Christian circles Lewis is famous for the revival that happened there in 1949. Lives were changed, sin was acknowledged and repented of, and people turned fervently to God in prayer. The revivals of the past to a large extent arose from people having a concern to see God's holy presence manifest in their churches, and led to a great mourning over and repentance of personal sin. We should not need a revival to mourn over our sin, but if we did mourn over sin, could that be a prelude to revival? And I mean revival, knowing the real presence of God, not revivalism where people are manipulated into particular responses.

Of course love is important, and showing God's love demonstrates that we know God. However, it is holiness that prepares us to be with Him. If we are not taking holiness seriously then we are not taking God seriously, **1 Thessalonians 4 v 3-8**.

Being Godly in Righteousness

The second godly characteristic that I want to make reference to is righteousness. We are to be righteous as God is righteous, **1 John 3 v 7**. Righteousness is closely linked to holiness, but it is distinct from it, for example **Ephesians 4 v 22-24**, **1 Corinthians 1 v 30**.

Righteousness is another portmanteau word with various facets of meaning. Where holiness might be seen as an absence, a disengagement, in the sense of separateness from or absence of sin, righteousness is definitely a real presence and engagement with the world. And it is not something that we can obtain for ourselves.

Righteousness relates to our standing with respect to God's Law. There is a legal aspect to righteousness and there is also the doing of acts of righteousness, doing what is right. We do what is right because we are righteous, we do not become righteous because of our doing right.

God's declaration that we are righteous, His pronouncement that we are "not guilty" in His sight, is what is often referred to as our justification. The process of our becoming more righteous day by day is our sanctification. Some people describe our being justified as "just as if I'd never sinned". However, this is not entirely correct when we look at the Lamb upon the throne, who carries the marks of His crucifixion on His body, **Revelation 5 v 6**. Our Saviour is forever different because of our sin. There is a permanent reminder of our sin, and God's grace.

In the past, some people have taken the need for holiness to extremes by trying to withdraw from the world, from the society in which they lived. However, the need for righteousness means that we must be out and about in the world, doing what is right, to show what God is like. We cannot hide away from society at large, rather we need to be an integral part of it, being salt and light.

You don't get the benefits of salt by leaving it in its packet; it has to be applied. You don't get the benefits of light by hiding it away; it has to shine forth. The world will not benefit from our relationship with God unless we get stuck into the society in which we live.

Again, some people say that we are to be Christ to those around us. I would temper this with a warning of the danger that we can start to think we are god-like rather than godly. Paul calls us ambassadors for Christ, and it is probably safer to say that we represent Christ to others rather than that we are Christ to others.

Being Godly in Perfection

The third godly characteristic I want to touch on is buried in the heart of the Sermon on the Mount. There is the incredible command from Jesus to be perfect as our heavenly Father is perfect, **Matthew 5 v 48**. This is not to advocate perfectionism, in which we delude ourselves that we have no sin, do not sin and in this life cannot sin. Rather it is to be without spot and blemish, untarnished and pure. For a sacrifice to be acceptable to God the animal had to be perfect, ie without any defect or blemish, **Leviticus 22 v 21**.

I remember when I was a cub scout that we would all form a ring and say in unison, "Akela, we will do our best". But what sort of promise do you make to God, if any? Do you promise to do your best? If so, then I'm afraid you are not aiming high enough. Our best is not good enough, we have to aim to do God's best. God sets the standard for us as holiness, righteousness and perfection.

Again, perfection also has two realities to it, our status before God and our seeking to become more perfect day by day.

It is a common ploy of preachers and speakers to challenge congregations to stand up or to raise their hands, and then to sit down or lower their hand unless they think they are perfect. The expectation is that no-one will be left standing or with their hand up. But I wonder how they would react if someone remained stood up or with their hand up? We are told in **Hebrews 10 v 14** that by one sacrifice He has made us perfect for ever. That is our standing before God. We have been made perfect. But we all know that in our life on earth we have a long way to go to become perfect in all that we think and say and do.

If you are wondering how to be perfect day by day, I believe that our growing in perfection lies in our seeking purity, in living a blameless life in the power of the Holy Spirit. It is not something we can do alone by gritting our teeth and telling ourselves we must try harder. God knows how he wants us to be and we need to work with Him to change, and to accept the changes He will bring into our lives.

Being Godly in Love

Just in case you think love is getting a raw deal in all this, remember that we are to imitate God in this respect as well, **Ephesians 5 v 1-2**.

The Grace of God

We are to be holy, righteous and perfect as God is holy, righteous and perfect. Because He is, and in the same way as He is. However, we cannot be like God in His infinite holiness, righteousness and perfection because we are finite, limited human beings. Not god-like, but godly.

If all this exhortation to holiness, righteousness and perfection sounds too hard, too remote from reality, then yes it is hard. But it is the reality to which we are called and in which we live. This is the standard that God sets for us. God sets the standard high, and if we do not aim to reach that standard then we are aiming short, we are sinning. One definition of sin is to miss the target, so if we are not aiming for God's standard then we cannot help but miss, to sin.

I reckon that these three characteristics of holiness, righteousness and perfection, all acted out with love, are the foundation and basic ingredients of all the other characteristics that a disciple is to display. If and when we come to look at the sermon on the mount, especially the Beatitudes, look at their content through the lens of our calling to holiness, righteousness and perfection. They will cease to be familiar and comfortable verses and will become

challenging, life changing words from God to us.

But I don't want you to leave here feeling you face an impossible task. Remember that we have a gracious and loving Father in heaven, and in His Son we have a gracious and loving Saviour who equips us with a gracious and loving Holy Spirit to mortify sin in our lives (to use an old term), who equips us to resist temptation and to do right, who purifies us from sin.

Paul encourages us in his letters with great statements about reconciliation with God, eg **Colossians, 1v 21-22**. And in his letter to the Ephesians he gives us a magnificent statement of the reality in which we find ourselves, by the grace of God, **Ephesians 1 v 3-14**, but that is a different sermon.

With each of these three characteristics there is the declaration of God that we are something in His sight; we are holy, we are righteous, we are perfect, not because of anything inherent in us but because Christ is all these things and by grace through faith in Him, these virtues of His are credited to us. Rejoice in that. If we trust in Christ for salvation then we are holy, we are righteous, we are perfect in God's sight. So in terms of our standing before God we are what and where we should be.

We have so much to be thankful for, because of what we are in Christ, but we also have so much to do to become more and more like Him.

The reality in this life is that we do not live fully holy, fully righteous, fully perfect lives because of the sin that still causes us to stumble in our Christian race. So in this mortal life we struggle against sin and strive to develop all these characteristics in which we are to show godliness. However, when we stumble, God picks us up. When we sin and confess our sin, God forgives us, **1 John 1 v 9**. So although we do not aim to fail, we do fail, but then we have a gracious God who still loves us, who still dwells within us by His Holy Spirit, and who still empowers us to grow in character to be more like Christ day by day.

God's Plan For Us

Does God have a plan for us? Yes, most certainly. It is not about which church to join, our employment if any, which life partner if any, even where we are to serve Him. Rather it is to present us to Himself holy, righteous and perfect, **Colossians, 1v 21-22**. That is a tremendous destiny, and we should start preparing now.

So, is your desire to be god-like or godly? The sin that would have us make ourselves like God has been dealt with by the blood of Christ so that we might be godly. Let us pray for one another to be godly. And then let us encourage each other in developing godliness, so that we will all be brought safe through the day of judgement and will see God face to face, standing in His presence to worship Him for eternity.