

Living Today as Kingdom Children

A sermon preached by Dr. John Clayton at Covenant Presbyterian Church of Fort Smith, Arkansas on August 21, 2022.

Therefore let us not pass judgment on one another any longer, but rather decide never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of a brother. I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself, but it is unclean for anyone who thinks it unclean. For if your brother is grieved by what you eat, you are no longer walking in love. By what you eat, do not destroy the one for whom Christ died. So do not let what you regard as good be spoken of as evil. For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking but of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. Whoever thus serves Christ is acceptable to God and approved by men. So then let us pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding. Do not, for the sake of food, destroy the work of God. Everything is indeed clean, but it is wrong for anyone to make another stumble by what he eats. It is good not to eat meat or drink wine or do anything that causes your brother to stumble. The faith that you have, keep between yourself and God. Blessed is the one who has no reason to pass judgment on himself for what he approves. But whoever has doubts is condemned if he eats, because the eating is not from faith. For whatever does not proceed from faith is sin (Rom. 14:13–23).¹

The Lord sent Samuel to the house of Jesse to anoint one of his sons as the next king of Israel, but Samuel was cautioned, “Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature. . . . For the LORD looks on the heart” (1 Sam. 16:7). Of Jesse’s sons, they all passed before Samuel, all of them except one, the youngest, David, a shepherd. And so David was summoned from the pasture, and when he arrived, Samuel knew at once, for the Lord said, “Arise, anoint him, for this is he” (1 Sam. 16:12). The Lord had chosen a king for Israel, who was then anointed and confirmed and “the Spirit of the LORD rushed upon David from that day forward” (1 Sam. 16:13). It was truly an extraordinary day in the house of Jesse! And then, nothing; nothing else was said or done: no coronation, no celebration, only the presence of the Lord patiently leading David toward his destiny.

Depending on how you calculate it, it would be at least 15 long years before he would be king. Fifteen years in which he would experience the high of highs and low of lows, living life as the someday king. Can you imagine the frustration and despair? Talk about living patiently with anticipation! Why would God choose David, anoint him as king, and then let so much time pass, years roll on? Even the one key witness, who knew God’s intent, Samuel, died well before David became king. Did his hope flounder with Samuel’s funeral?

So, what do you suppose it was like for David to live as the already anointed but not yet coronated king? Well, in a sense, you know. If you are in Christ, you have been chosen by God, given faith, justified as righteous, and filled with the Spirit of God. In Christ, you are a child of God, a citizen of heaven (Phil. 3:20), an heir of the kingdom, in fact a fellow heir with Christ (Rom. 8:17). You are royalty, but you have not yet donned your regal robe of glory. Like David, in a sense, you are living in the already but not yet.

¹ Unless referenced otherwise, all Scripture quotations are from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2001).

When the apostle Paul typically talks about the kingdom of God in his letters, he refers to it in a future tense, connected to Christ's return, but in our passage he refers to it in the present tense, "the kingdom of God is." He first tells what it is not — "a matter of eating and drinking" — and he then tells us what it is — "righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit." As eating and drinking are temporal matters and righteousness, peace, and joy are eternal, he is teaching us how the *not yet* is lived today.

Consider Others

The Roman church, like the modern church, was full of critics. Some Christians abstained from certain foods; others indulged. Both thought the other was wrong. Some Christians kept holy days and festivals; others treated every day the same. Both thought the other was wrong. The weak and strong, as Paul refers to them, both felt incensed to judge each other.

Paul confronts them both, saying, "Forget about deciding what's right for each other" (MSG) and consider the welfare of one another. To make his point, Paul uses the imagery of a "stumbling block," a spiritual tripping hazard, and a "hindrance", or literally a "trap" (NET). Both metaphors picture the same liability, and it is not an innocent one: trying to play your brother's or sister's conscience can cause him to stumble, cause her to fall. Rather than enlightened, he may be ensnared. Rather than liberated, she may be enslaved.

The remedy for the potential casualty is humility: "Instead of being motivated by selfish ambition or vanity, each of you should, in humility, be moved to treat one another as more important than yourself" (Phil. 2:3 NET). Of course, someone may argue that this is tantamount to letting our brother or sister continue in ignorance. Doesn't Paul freely confess, "I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself"? Shouldn't we be concerned when a brother shackles himself with limitations when in Christ there is liberty? But such an argument misses, what we might call, the kingdom perspective, as Paul explains, "For if your brother is grieved by what you eat, you are no longer walking in love." Food and drink will pass, but "Love never ends" (1 Cor. 13:8).

Such love considers others through the lens of the love of God: "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16). Now think about it: Would you "destroy the one for whom Christ died" for the sake of something as trivial as food? No, you would look on them as God does, trusting their care in his.

In saying this, I am reminded of David's tumultuous relationship with Saul. Over and over again, Saul was full of selfish ambition and vanity, concerned with only himself, and even seeking to destroy the future king. Over and over again, David could have reacted in self-interest. But God gave David the grace to say repeatedly, "The LORD forbid that I should put out my hand against the LORD's anointed" (1Sam. 26:11). David considered God's purpose in Saul to be greater than his own temporal circumstances. As children of the kingdom, may God give us the grace to say the same.

Pursue Peace

When David was anointed king, the Scripture says, “the Spirit of the LORD rushed upon [him] from that day forward” (1 Sam. 16:13). From that day forth he was guaranteed the kingdom and empowered to reign. Certainly not identically but similarly, the same could be said of us. We have been given the Holy Spirit as a guarantee of our inheritance (Eph. 1:14), and it is through him that we live as heirs of the kingdom. This is evidenced in our lives by what Scripture calls fruit, godly character the Holy Spirit produces in us. Paul singles out three in our passage as characteristic: righteousness, peace, and joy.

By faith we are justified as righteous, a right standing before our God forever, and through his Spirit we are enabled and empowered to live righteously day by day. By faith we are at peace with God, saved from his wrath, and called his children, and through his Spirit we are enabled to live out this peace in our lives, notably with others. In all of this we rejoice in the grace of God in our salvation, an inexplicable joy given to us by the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit. In this sense, as well as all the other fruits of the Spirit, though our inheritance awaits us, we enjoy its blessings today through the Holy Spirit.

Yet, how often do we disconnect the Spirit’s work in our lives from the kingdom of God. We may lament a lack of heavenly mindedness, but do we ignore heaven’s practical presence in our relations with one another? Paul teaches us that kingdom life means considering others and for their sake pursuing “what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding.” What Paul describes is akin to the Hebrew concept of *shalom*, often translated “peace” but far more rich in meaning than one English word can convey. *Shalom* means completeness, soundness, welfare, or peace, and even victory (1 Chron. 12:18).² But I like the way one pastor explains it: “Shalom means wholeness, the dynamic, vibrating health of [God’s people] that pulses with divinely directed purpose and surges with life-transforming love.”³ Sounds like the kingdom of heaven, doesn’t it? It sounds like living “for peace and for mutual upbuilding” in the church.

When we seek *shalom*, we are not simply quieting controversy or settling for solitude. We are seeking the best for one another. We are living in such a way that doesn’t ignore differences but fosters fellowship in our differences. We are living in such a way that not only removes a stumbling block but also scans for minefields. We are living in such a way that never tears down but builds up in “all things” (1 Cor. 14:26).

This of course is far easier said than done. In reality, pursuing peace with our brother and sister can sometimes be remarkably difficult. When righteousness, peace, and joy of the Holy Spirit is overshadowed by fruits of our flesh, pursuing *shalom* can be quickly shelved. Like David’s response to Nabal’s lack of gratitude, we can be quick to strap on our sword (1 Sam. 25:9-13) and pursue retaliation. But it is in moments like David’s that we need one another more. God

² “Shalom” (7965), Strong’s Concordance, accessed August 18, 2022, <https://biblehub.com/hebrew/7965.htm>.

³ Eugene H. Peterson, *Run with the Horses: The Quest for Life at Its Best* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2019), 148.

kept David from disaster through humble Abigail, who fell at his feet, reasoning first and then pleading,

Please forgive the trespass of your servant. ...when the LORD has done to [you] according to all the good that he has spoken concerning you and has appointed you [leader] over Israel, [you] shall have no cause of grief or pangs of conscience for having shed blood without cause or for [you] working salvation [for yourself]...”
(1 Sam. 25:23-31).

God graciously led Abigail to assess the situation, remind David of his anointed identity and regal future, and to forgive and pursue peace, leading David to respond, “Blessed be the LORD, the God of Israel, who sent you this day to meet me! Blessed be your discretion, and blessed be you, who have kept me this day from bloodguilt and from working salvation with my own hand!” (1 Sam. 25:32-33). May God fill his church and grant each of us an Abigail, and may we listen.

As we are each acceptable to God in Christ, we serve his interest in the church as a whole. Difficulty in our relationships with one another should lead us to an ever-increasing comprehension and understanding of God’s place in our lives, should encourage our faith all the more, and lead us to pray. Rather than strapping on our swords, we must fall to our knees. As we do this, the Lord will begin to show us the connection between God’s will and our brothers and sisters, teaching us forgiveness, empathy, and service. When we discover God’s will and love at the center of every encounter, we are seeing it in light of the kingdom of God.

Live Rightly

God is at work in his church, and we must not do anything to impede his progress in our sanctification, even something as trivial as disagreement over food. Paul states it starkly: “Do not, for the sake of food, destroy the work of God.” “Destroy the work of God”? Is that even possible? Of course, Paul is not challenging the sovereign will of God. What he means is far more practical: Just as the Spirit of the Lord can use us to build up one another, so our flesh can lead us to tear one another down. The implication is that the Lord is working in you and in me often through you and through me, and we must take care in what we do.

If you are in constant conflict with others in the church, the problem is almost certainly *you*, regardless of your age, experience, or knowledge. Neither you nor I ever reach a point in life when we are licensed to criticize or cleared to cause conflict. God may very well have given you the faith that frees you from the constraints of others. Congratulations! How wonderful! Now, keep it “between yourself and God.” Your brother or sister may not be there yet in their maturity, and your mouth will not make it better. Learn the blessed art of spiritual quietude.

In love, let us learn to respect the convictions of one another. Some are ready to enjoy all the liberty the gospel gives. Some are not, and “whatever does not proceed from faith is sin. This calls for sanctified patience with one another. As one commentator puts it, “For a Christian not a single decision and action can be good which he does not think he can justify on the ground of

Living Today as Kingdom Children

his Christian conviction and his liberty before God in Christ.”⁴ Or to put it simply, “If the way you live isn’t consistent with what you believe, then it’s wrong” (Rom. 14:23, MSG).

And so, we live rightly with one another, respecting each other’s conscience, lest we cause one another to sin against conviction. “For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking but of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.”

⁴ Ribberdos quoted in Douglas Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1996), 863.