

The Church: God's School

Text:

Matthew 28:19-20

“And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

Introduction:

We are looking at the church from a practical point of view. We are trying to sketch an image of what normal believers should experience as they participate in the body of Christ. Today I want us to think about the Church as God's school, the place where we learn to walk in God's ways. The Bible often pictures life as a choice between two paths. The names of these paths or ways may vary, but the image is always the same. There is the way of the righteous, and the way of the wicked. The wise man rejects the path of the wicked and walks in the path of righteousness. This is an image that is prevalent in both the Old and New Testaments.

The Old Testament often refers to learning to avoid the way of the wicked and walk in the path of righteousness as wisdom. It is the point Solomon makes in the opening chapters of Proverbs where he contrasts wisdom and folly and encourages his son to reject the way of folly and walk in the way of wisdom. He says for example in 4:10-15:

“Hear, my son, and accept my words, that the years of your life may be many. I have taught you the way of wisdom; I have led you in the paths of uprightness. When you walk, your step will not be hampered, and if you run, you will not stumble. Keep hold of instruction; do not let go; guard her, for she is your life. Do not enter the path of the wicked, and do not walk in the way of the evil. Avoid it; do not go on it; turn away from it and pass on.”

Most of us are familiar with Psalm 1 which comes at the beginning of the Psalter for a very good reason. It is there to remind us that life is a choice between two ways, and to encourage us to reject the way of the wicked and chose the way of blessedness:

“Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers; but his delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his

law he meditates day and night. He is like a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither. In all that he does, he prospers. The wicked are not so, but are like chaff that the wind drives away. Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous; for the LORD knows the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish.”

When we come to the New Testament we find Jesus saying to us: “Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few” (Matthew 7:13-14).

The Apostle Paul exhorts us to flee all that is wicked and unrighteous and to “pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, steadfastness, gentleness” (I Timothy 6:11).

This image of two ways, two paths is what we need to visualize as we come to our text. Remember Christ came into the world to complete God’s revelation, to show us God’s path more vividly than it had ever been known before. In fact, in John chapter 14 when Thomas asks him the question: “How can we know the way?” Jesus replies “I am the way, the truth and the life, no one comes to the Father except by me” (verse 6). Now let’s put that idea together with the text we have taken this morning. Jesus is the ultimate revelation of God’s way, God’s path, the wise path, the path of righteousness, the path we want to follow and pursue. This is the reason he tells his disciples, as he leaves them to carry on his work, that they are to go to all nations and make disciples, not disciples of themselves, but disciples of him. They are to do this by announcing the good news of salvation and by initiating those who believe into his new community, the church, by “baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit”, and then they are to “to teach them to do whatsoever I have commanded you.” Simply put, this means that all who become disciples of Jesus are to follow him to walk in his ways, to live as he lived. This is our role as the Church of Jesus Christ, to bring individuals into a relationship with Christ, to incorporate them into his church through baptism, and then to teach them to walk in his ways, to teach them to do everything that that he taught his disciples to do. This is what we mean when we say that the Church is God’s school. It is the place where we learn the way of Christ, and where we learn to walk in his way.

As we think about the church as God’s school, I want us to consider first what is to be taught, and then the method by which it is taught.

I. The Teaching

Jesus leaves no doubt about what we must know if we are to be his disciples. His instruction is clear: “Teach them to do everything I have taught you”, he tells his disciples before leaving

them to return to the Father. Two things stand out in this command; first the word “everything”, and secondly the two little words “to do”.

Christ came to teach us the way of life. All that he taught us, all that he demonstrated to us is important. There is nothing unnecessary or superfluous in Christ’s teaching. Each thing that he taught us to do is an essential part of the way. If we are to be true followers of the way we must learn to do all that he taught us. We live in an age of spiritual eclecticism where people think that they can pick and choose and create their own way. They may choose some of what Christ taught and combine it with some of what someone else taught. This is not the way of Christ, the way that leads to life and blessedness. We also live in a time where even Christians have often failed to teach others the full way of Christ. We would probably be disappointed by the results if we could give a simple quiz to all those who claim to be followers of Christ. The quiz would be to simply list ten things that Christ taught us to do that they do on a regular basis. I fear that the majority would not even know ten things that Christ taught us to do. I once heard an interview with Henry Blackaby, the author of *Experiencing God*, in which he related how that during a significant period of time in addressing groups of pastors he asked them the question: “How many of you have one time in your ministry made an effort to enumerate and teach all of the teachings of Christ.” He said that he only had one pastor who ever answered that he had. This is the one thing that Jesus specifically instructed his church to do, yet we have too often fallen far short. Jesus taught us how to live, he taught us the way of life, but it does us no good if we do not follow it.

II. The Method

Here is a list of a few of the things Jesus taught us to do in no particular order:

- to “let our ‘yes’ be yes be yes and our ‘no’ be no”
- to “always pray and never faint”
- to “turn the other cheek”
- to “love one another as he loved us”
- to serve rather than to seek to be served
- to rejoice when we are persecuted because of our identification with him
- to not return evil for evil
- to not excuse ourselves by finding fault with others
- to forgive
- to love our enemies
- to be “wise as serpents and harmless as doves”

- to not “lay up treasures on earth”, but to “lay up treasures in heaven”

We could go on for awhile, but that is a dozen and should help me make my point. Just the mention of each one of these things probably spurred some of you to ask yourselves: “What does that mean, and how do you do it?” Notice that all of these things are things to do. Knowing about them, knowing that Jesus said them is not enough. We must learn to do them.

We are asking the question: “How do we learn to do what Christ’s taught us to do?” or if we turn it around: “How do we, as the body of Christ, teach others to walk in the way of Christ?” In our setting when we hear the words “teach” and “learn” the first image that comes to our mind is a classroom. The teacher teaches and the students learn. Our churches often are built on this model. It is almost a given that an effective church must have a well-organized Christian education department. Now I am not against classrooms and well-organized Christian education departments, but I would also add that Jesus had neither. The model that Jesus followed was that of master and disciple. Since “disciple” has taken on an almost entirely religious connotation in our time, let me suggest a synonym, “apprentice”. In an apprenticeship we learn to do by observing and following someone who knows, who has, himself, been taught by the example of someone else. What we are learning is the way of Christ, how to live as Christ lived. Now the best way to learn to forgive is not to learn fifteen Bible verses about forgiveness, but to see someone else forgive. It is good to know the verses. That establishes forgiveness as God’s way. We know that Jesus taught us to do it, and we know that it is right to do it, but when we see someone else do it we have a model to follow. This is the reason the Apostle Paul was not afraid on more than one occasion to say “follow me as I follow Christ”. This is why he could say to Timothy: “But thou hast fully known my doctrine, manner of life, purpose, faith, longsuffering, charity, patience” (II Timothy 3:10).

Most of the important lessons we have learned about being a follower of Christ we have learned from the concrete example of another believer. There is no substitute for seeing the faith lived out in the life of another person. When we do we say: “that is what it looks like”. Then we can go and do it ourselves. Now this implies that in the church we are all both teachers and students. We never reach a place when we have learned all that there is to learn. Sometimes the youngest will be taught by the oldest, and sometimes the oldest will be taught by the youngest. The goal of all should be to be eager disciples with one eye on the Scriptures seeking to understand the way of Christ as it has been communicated to us and one eye on our fellow believers as we seek to understand what the way of Christ looks like when it is lived out in the reality of life.

