

THE KINGDOM OF GRACE

**Nehemiah 8:10; Romans 12:18;
14:17; Philippians 4:4, 6-7;
Colossians 3:12 and 14**

Righteousness in Reality

By

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Opening.

In Romans 14:17 the Apostle tells us, **“the Kingdom of God is not eating and drinking.”** I.e., according to the context at work here {which is all of ch. 14}— whether you eat only vegetables or whether you eat only meat, whether you drink wine with your dinner or abstain entirely— none of these things is a matter of *true spirituality* in God’s Kingdom. Whether you celebrate some days as holy or every day alike, what matters in Christ’s Kingdom is whether you’re living out each day **“in step with the Holy Spirit,”** by means of His awesome might. All the rest of this, everything mentioned in this passage, becomes an issue {and thus enters into the spiritual arena} when and only when it causes another Follower of Christ with a less faith-informed conscience to stumble over it in *his* Journey. Here’s the point of this passage: Whatever you hold as a conviction in your conscience, let it guide *you* without imposing it on someone else. Either pro or con. “You need to do this; you can’t do that; no, don’t ever do such and such.” What the Kingdom of God does consist of, from a spiritual perspective, is **“righteousness and peace and joy in the Spirit.”** Righteousness here is reality based, that is, in real Time, real Space, actual experience.

The Spiritual Reality Around Us.

When Paul say’s, **“the Kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit”** {NAU}, what he’s saying is the Kingdom of God is not *primarily* a physical reality; it is primarily a *spiritual* reality. In both his theology and his practice {and, for him at least, the two never seem to be separated}, it is a matter of engagement, empowerment, in-tune-ness with the Spirit of God. The Kingdom of God is headed for a physical manifestation in that Christ will rule and reign one Day over a literal, physical, and political kingdom standing head and shoulders above the nations of the Earth for a thousand years. This is what theologians call the Millennium, from the Latin word for a ‘thousand’— Revelation 20:2, 3, 4, 5, 6 and 7. But this political kingdom will not be called Republican, or Independent, or Green Party, and it certainly won’t be called New Democrat or Socialist.

It will be called **“holy”** and ruled with an **“iron scepter”** {Ps. 2:9 and Rev. 12:5}, meaning justice is dispensed swiftly and fairly. It will be a Kingdom of mercy as well, ruled by the **“Prince of Peace,”** for those two ideals, of justice and mercy, are not incompatible in the Reign of God. The prophet Isaiah said, **“For to us a *Child* is born, to us a *Son* is given, and the government will be on His shoulders. And He will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of His government and peace there will be *no end*. He will reign on David’s throne and over his Kingdom, establishing and upholding it with *justice* and *righteousness* from that time on and forever. The zeal of the LORD Almighty [‘the LORD of the Everlasting Armies’] will accomplish this,”** 9:6-7 {NIV}.

Essay— The Kingdom and the Spirit.

The Kingdom of God as Paul describes it in Romans 14:17— **“righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit”**— is a spiritual reality with tangible results in the physical realm. So, let’s take a look at this.

A Relational Righteousness.

E.g., **“righteousness”** is an observable action in a person’s life. You can see it in experience; you can benefit from it at the hands of another. How we treat other people is the second most important aspect of our holiness, and the most crucial component of our character in Christ Jesus. Get this. **Holiness and maturity are best seen and experienced in how we relate to one another, i.e., in our relationships.** In Colossians 3 the Apostle tells us to **“put on,”** to literally **“clothe ourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience....** [While much is usually made of the ‘putting on,’ from *enduo* which literally means ‘to clothe oneself,’ the point is you’re actually *choosing* from the resources of Christ within you, to deal with other people in ‘compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience’ rather than hardness and insensitivity, *unkindness*, arrogance, power which seeks to dominate and control, and *impatience*.] **And over all these put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity,”** vv. 12 and 14. Love is the binding force of Life; love binds all the other virtues of Jesus into one.

He goes on to say, **“Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts.... Let the Word of Christ richly dwell within you ...and whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus,”** vv. 15a, 16a, 17a. The whole context of these commands is the Life of the Spirit in the **“new man,”** Jesus Christ {or *Jesus* living through us, just as the **“old man”** was the *flesh* living through us: Rom. 6-7}; and again, this Life *lived out* in the Body, among the Brotherhood. Are you getting this? In and among the people of God, one relationship after another. There are no greater relational dynamics than those found in this passage. If you want to know where you’re at in the Journey of the Heart, if you’re quite the man or woman you were meant to be {or desire to be}, how you treat other people will reveal that; how you relate to those you love will expose it for you. **Our relational impact reveals just about everything we need to know in the Journey.**

Peace in Prayer and Practice.

“Peace”— at peace with God *and* at peace with man. Peace with God is a matter of choosing humility over arrogance, a choice to surrender your soul to the rule and authority of God’s Kingdom, to live like God really is God, like Jesus really is Lord— the King of all Creation, all of life. Paul said in Philippians 4:6-7, **“Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding** [And is beyond all human comprehension or human capability: you *cannot* produce this peace apart from Christ and the Path He lays out in v. 6.],

will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus” {NIV}. The word for “**minds**” is *noema* and it really means ‘your thoughts.’ So, the idea is ‘the peace of God will garrison your soul, it will stand guard over what you think and *where* you think it in Christ Jesus.’

How you ask? What precisely are the mechanics? Well, *worry* over nothing; that’s step number one. *Pray* over everything; that’s step number two. Or, if you need it broken down into more explicit detail: **Decide not to worry, choose faith over fear. Then don’t worry. Next step, decide to pray; then pray.** Offer your prayers and petitions to the Father with “**thanksgiving**,” which is an attitude of unmistakable gratitude. We thank God for what He *does*, but we praise Him for who He *is* {a good point to remember}. “**Prayer**” is both personal praise for who God is and personal “**request**” for what one needs.

“**Petition**” is prayer offered on behalf of others. And all of this offered with what the Greeks called *eucharistia*, an attitude of thankfulness. Not demand, not complaint, not a long list of what you want accomplished by lunch-time, or else! I’m amazed sometimes, and not in a good way, at how much of my prayer life is just a ‘take it for granted God’s going to do what I want’ mentality, or a laundry list of projects and complaints, and how little of this is seasoned with an attitude of awe and wonder. I’m coming to realize more and more each day that the nature of prayer is conversational intimacy, a hunger for communication, both to give and to receive. It is a faithful, trusting, believing communication with the only One capable of acting in real Time and Space in a way which changes things for all Eternity, irreversibly, in a way that changes people without coercion or manipulation!

Let’s come back to gratitude for a moment, because *grace* is the attitude of gratitude. Men and women who love grace and live grace are supremely grateful— for Life, its gifts, and the glorious work of God they see everywhere around them. Peterson puts it this way: “**Don’t fret or worry. Instead of worrying, pray. Let petitions and praises shape your worries into prayers, letting God know your concerns. Before you know it, a sense of God’s wholeness, everything coming together for good, will come and settle you down. It’s wonderful what happens when Christ displaces worry at the center of your life**”— *The Message*.

What about peace with man? There is a larger context to Romans 12:18 and the injunction that, “**If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men**,” and it is a beautiful section of Scripture which paints for us a very clear picture of Life in the Spirit of Christ, Life in the Kingdom of God. It actually begins in v. 9 but I want to begin for present purposes in v. 16. The Apostle says, “**Live in harmony with one another....**” Not in discord or dissension, but in “**harmony**.” Then he tells us how in the very next statement: by not living out of pride or arrogance, the overestimation of self and the underestimation of everyone else. “**Do not be proud or arrogant, but be willing to associate with the lowly, with people of low position. Do not be conceited** [NAU has, ‘do not be wise in our own estimation’]. [Notice v. 17] **Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right**

in the eyes of everybody.” I.e., whether your actions are wide open to the public eyes or completely private, make them in the Spirit of Christ *right* actions! There are two qualifiers in the next v. **“If it is possible** [Which tells us what? Sometimes it is *not* possible.], **as far as it depends on you** [Meaning sometimes it does *not* depend on you, but if it does:], **live at peace with everyone,**” Romans 12:16:18 {NIV}.

The easy way around the injunction of v. 18 is to look at a situation in which there is discord and disharmony between you and another person and say, “Well, it’s not possible to have peace. And even if it was, it doesn’t depend on me. They were wrong, they owe me an apology, they haven’t stooped, bowed, and groveled at my feet quite long enough. When they do, then we’ll have peace.” **But what if it *does* depend on you? What if, in reality, you *are* the problem?** And the reason the poison of bitterness exists between you and the pain of brokenness has ripped right through the fabric of this relationship is *you*: your unwillingness to embrace change from the hand of God, your unwillingness to repent of wrongdoing or wrong speaking, your unwillingness to acknowledge you’re not perfect and neither is your spouse or son or daughter or parent or pastor or friend, etc. And you never will be as long as you reside in a body stained by sin. But that you’re called to **“love one another”** anyway... regardless.

Living With Joy.

So, **“the Kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit,”** joy in the Spirit of God—Romans 14:17 {NIV}. Do you know how hard it is to live with joy in a World unceasingly at War? Nehemiah 8:10b says, **“Do not grieve, for the *joy* of the LORD is your strength”** {NIV}. *Strength?* Wow, most of the time it’s not even a daily boost. Nehemiah, on the day the Law of God was read so all could understand, has said to the people of Jerusalem, **“Go and enjoy choice food and sweet drinks, and send some to those who have nothing prepared. This day is *sacred* to our Lord. Do not grieve, for the joy of the LORD is your strength.”** It says in v. 12, **“Then all the people went away to eat and drink, to send portions of food and to *celebrate* with great joy, because they now understood the words that had been made known to them.”** This may be part of the problem right here, as to why so few of us live with anything even closely resembling joy. **Joy comes from God, joy comes from our *knowing* His Word and *obeying* His will.** I don’t mean knowing about Him; I mean knowing Him daily as powerful and present, intimately involved in every arena of our lives. **Joy flows out of our relationship with God.** And the deeper the relationship, the more joy we begin to experience and the more strength it fuses into the soul.

“Joy” is from the Greek noun *chara*, a cognate of *charis*, the word for ‘grace.’ Here’s what I believe the Spirit’s saying to us. *Joy cannot be separated from a Life of grace* {both given and received}; *and grace cannot be separated from the Life of Christ*. John said, **“For of His fullness we have all received, and grace upon grace. For the Law was given through Moses; grace and Truth were *realized* through Jesus Christ”** {NAU}. Or as I paraphrased v. 17 for you, **“The Law— relentless in its**

righteousness and undeterred in its demands— was given by means of Moses, but grace and Truth, and in perfect balance, were brought into being by Jesus Christ” {RRExp}. See, grace is the foundation of joy and Jesus is the Fountain of Grace. Intimacy with Jesus as a Person, a very distinct individual with whom we have a very real relationship, an interactive exchange through the conversation of prayer, the passion for His Word, and the worship of our lives, brings immense and unshakable joy.

Paul in Philippians 4:4 lays out the third of three commands in vv. 1-4 when he says, **“Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!”** The verb he uses means- *‘be filled with joy, rejoice exceedingly.’* Every member of the Brotherhood is embraced in this challenge, by the way, which tells us there are none excluded from the Joy of Jesus. **“Always”** means- *‘at all times,’* and Paul uses it to heighten the sense of the command. What he’s saying is those of us who walk by means of the Spirit of Christ {who is the Spirit of Grace}: “must keep on, every moment of our lives, rejoicing exceedingly, keep on constantly being filled with joy.” Why ...because of circumstance? No. Because of who Jesus is, because of who *you* are in Him, and because of all that’s been given you by the Hands of Grace. **“Rejoice in the Lord always; I say it again, rejoice!”** Paul emphasizes it twice to the followers of Jesus in Philippi, and twenty centuries later to you and I, because he wants to express the profound importance of joy to Life in Christ’s Kingdom. And this Kingdom is a Kingdom of Joy. As David said in Psalm 16:11, **“You have made known to me the Path of Life; You will fill me with joy in Your presence, with eternal pleasures at Your right hand”** {NIV}.

Finale.

Returning to Romans 14, to **“righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit.”** You could translate this last phrase *‘with the Holy Spirit, through the Holy Spirit, by means of the Holy Spirit’* and all would be accurate. The point is our lives are consecrated to the Spirit of Christ, set apart for the sole purpose of walking in **“the Way”** He sets before us. And no other. As we move along the Path of Life, again following in the footsteps of the Master, this becomes the ever-present reality of a Disciple: **“righteousness,”** or as I’ve chosen to translate it, **“holiness in right action, a soul at rest, and Jesus’ joy in the Spirit”** {RRExp}.

“The fruit of the Spirit is Love” {Gal. 5:22}, Paul said, and this love is genuine to the core of our being. They’re called His **“fruit”** precisely because they are *not* the results of our striving, struggling, and straining to bring them into being. They are brought forth within us as we watch, listen, and learn from the Master, i.e., as we admire and emulate Jesus Christ our Lord and do whatever is necessary to learn how to obey Him. **If you’re not prepared to do ‘whatever is necessary to learn how to obey Him,’ it naturally follows that you’ll see very little fruit by way of the Holy Spirit.** And this is precisely the problem— our unwillingness to surrender ourselves to the Spirit and do whatever is necessary to learn how to obey Him— which has brought about the current impasse we now see and experience in post-modern

Christianity: the utter inability to connect with God or with others. We *don't* walk with Jesus in all the daily details and thus we find it impossible to walk with others *in* the Life He offers. And this, like **“the anger of man,”** does not **“achieve the righteousness of God”** {Jms. 1:20 NAU}.

I thought you might find this a fitting and challenging finish to Paul's look at the Kingdom of God in the Age of Grace. It's called the **Lion Chasers Manifesto**. Enjoy.

Read it. Live it. *Quit living as if the purpose of life is to arrive safely at death.* Grab life by the mane. Set God-sized goals. Pursue God-ordained passions. Go after a dream that is destined to fail without divine intervention. Keep asking questions. Keep making mistakes. Keep seeking God. Stop pointing out problems and become part of the solution. Stop repeating the past and start creating the future. Stop playing it safe and start taking risks. Expand your horizons. Accumulate experiences. Consider the lilies. Enjoy the journey. *Find every excuse you can to celebrate everything you can.* Live like today is the first day and last day of your life. Don't let what's wrong with you keep you from worshipping what's right with God. *Burn sinful bridges.* Blaze a new trail. Criticize by creating. Worry less about what people think and more about what God thinks. Don't try to be who you're not. Be yourself. Laugh at yourself. Quit holding out. Quit holding back. Quit running away. Chase the Lion— Pastor Mark Batterson.

“Do not allow what you consider good [meat, vegetables, wine or water] to be spoken of as evil. For the Kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit, because anyone who serves Christ in this way [by serving others through the Law of Love] is *pleasing* to God and *approved* by men. Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to *peace* and to mutual edification,” to the building up of each other— Romans 14:16-19 {NIV}.