

Christ Lives in Me
Galatians 2:11-21
John Breon

Do you remember when *W. W. J. D.* was popular? Those initials were on bracelets, necklaces, T-shirts, Bibles, books, and music. Occasionally we still hear people ask, "What Would Jesus Do?" And, of course, there are parodies of the question asking it in various ways. A history teacher whose hero is Winston Churchill had a bracelet that said, "WWWD—What Would Winston Do?" The *W. W. J. D.* idea was a contemporary expression of an old way of looking at Christian life and discipleship.

In the late 1800's a pastor named Charles Sheldon published a novel called *In His Steps*. In that story a pastor challenges his congregation to ask "What would Jesus do?" about every decision they make and in every situation they face. In the novel, revival breaks out all over the city as Christians try to live like Jesus would if he were in their city.

Hundreds of years before Sheldon, Thomas á Kempis wrote a book called *The Imitation of Christ*. It's a devotional classic that's been published in many languages and gone through many editions. It's influenced more people's spiritual lives than nearly any book beside the Bible.

This theme of imitating Christ, of following his example, of asking what Jesus would do of course goes back to the New Testament. Jesus calls disciples to follow him. The verse where Sheldon got his title is 1 Peter 2:21: "To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow *in his steps*."

This is obviously an important dimension of discipleship. But it's not the only one. If Jesus is only our example and stays "out there" somewhere and discipleship is only trying to keep up with him or live the way he would on our own, we'll only fail and be frustrated. Walking "in his steps" is impossible unless we walk "in his Spirit." Imitating Christ is impossible unless he lives through us. We need to see following Jesus not as self-propelled but as Spirit-impelled. The Holy Spirit drives and motivates us in the life of discipleship. The question is not just what *would* Jesus do but what *does* Jesus do to enable us to live as his people?

Dallas Willard summarizes this aspect of discipleship:

And as a disciple of Jesus I am with him, by choice and by grace, learning from him how to live in the kingdom of God. ...how to live within the range of God's effective will, his life flowing through mine. ...I am learning from Jesus to live *my* life as he would live my life if he were I. I am not necessarily learning to do everything he did, but I am learning how to do everything I do in the manner that he did all that he did. (*The Divine Conspiracy* 283)

The apostle Paul usually speaks of believers being "in Christ." But he also often talks about Christ being in believers through the Holy Spirit. Christ dwelling in us is an essential part of Christian life. The passage in Galatians we're looking at today is one of the places where Paul emphasizes "Christ lives in me."

In Galatians Paul is defending the gospel and his authority as an apostle against some people who've come into the Galatian churches challenging him and the message he preaches. These opponents, or "agitators" as Paul calls them, probably believe that new life begins with faith in Christ. But they seem to be saying that new life is completed by taking on Jewish identity and observing the Jewish Law. Paul contends that it's all through faith in Christ, based on the faithfulness of Jesus.

To get his point across, Paul recalls a similar situation that happened in Antioch, which was the center of Gentile Christianity and headquarters for Paul's missionary activity.

One time Peter came from Jerusalem to Antioch. Peter had begun to learn that God accepts all people regardless of their race. So in Antioch he sat at table and ate with Gentile Christians—something Jews didn't do. But Peter was getting past those cultural and racial barriers. Then some Jewish Christians from Jerusalem showed up. Peter didn't want to offend them, so he quit eating with the Gentile Christians and ate only with the Jewish believers. All the other Jewish Christians in Antioch followed Peter's example. Even Barnabas, Paul's friend and mission partner, was led astray into what Paul saw as hypocrisy.

Paul saw that by refusing to eat with the Gentile believers Peter and the others were making them into second class citizens, as though they weren't fully Christian. This not only threatened the Church's unity, but the salvation that's the basis of that unity. If Gentile Christians could be excluded from fellowship with Jewish Christians because of food laws, then to enjoy full fellowship they would have to observe Jewish laws—not just food laws, but circumcision and all the other practices that marked Jews as distinct in the Roman Empire.

So basically, Peter's action was saying that Gentiles had to become Jews to be fully Christian. Previously, Peter's mind was changed about this by a vision from the Lord and an experience in the home of the Gentile Cornelius (Acts 10). Paul has argued against the need for Gentiles to become Jews to be Christians all along. He thought Peter was on his side in this. But now, Peter has violated their agreement.

So to preserve equality in salvation and unity in the church, Paul confronts Peter. He tells him,

If you, a Jew, live like a non-Jew when you're not being observed by the watchdogs from Jerusalem, what right do you have to require non-Jews to conform to Jewish customs just to make a favorable impression on your old Jerusalem cronies? (*The Message*)

What the Galatians were being faced with was very similar to what had gone on in Antioch. So Paul's speech to Peter becomes a speech to the Galatian churches. In verses 15 through 21 Paul summarizes the gospel. His major themes are here:

- being made right with God by grace through faith in Jesus Christ, not by works of the law
- dying with Christ and rising to new life with him
- Christ's indwelling believers through the Holy Spirit to empower his followers to live out this new relationship with God

Notice that new life begins by faith in Christ and it continues, it's fulfilled and completed, by faith in Christ.

Paul first speaks to his fellow Jews. He reminds them of the distinction that was normally made between Jews by birth, the people of the covenant, and Gentile "sinners", those who didn't have and so couldn't live by the Jewish Law. He says, "We Jewish believers know that people are not put right with God by the works of the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ."

Then Paul answers the objection that he faced many times—that his preaching of free grace encourages sin (he deals with this more thoroughly in Romans). Paul counters that the freedom that comes through faith in Christ is not a license to sin, but a strength to live in righteousness.

Now Paul illustrates what Peter and the others have done. He says, "If I tear down something and then build it again, I prove that I was wrong at first." To state that salvation comes one way and then to behave and to treat people as if it comes another way is rebuilding barriers that grace knocked down.

Paul says that through the law he died to the law so he could live for God. Believers no longer use obeying the law as a way to get right with God and belong to the people of God. Dying to the law means that it no longer rules a person's life. Instead, God's grace and righteousness in Christ rule through faith. Here Paul focuses on dying to the Law because that was the main concern in Galatia. In Romans 6, and elsewhere, he also talks about dying to sin.

Now he tells how this dying happens. "I have been crucified with Christ." When we put our faith in Christ, we identify with him in his dying. We die to all that Christ has died to. Christ's death puts an end to the age of the Law, so we die to the Law as our means of being people of God. Christ's death was for sin and deals the decisive blow to sin, so we die to sin as the ruling power in our lives.

When Paul talked about the death of Christ and our taking part in that death, he was thinking of more than just forgiveness for past sins, but also of a drastic break with sin. The death of Jesus and our dying with him demolishes sin's control of our lives. For those who are in Christ, a gulf as

wide and as deep as death is between what we now are and what we once were (Maxie Dunnam, *Alive in Christ* 35).

Because I have been crucified with Christ, "I" no longer live; "I" have died. I've been joined with Christ in his death, so that what he died to bring to an end has been brought to an end for me as well. Crucified with Christ, who we were apart from Christ is dead. That "I" lives no more.

John Woolman lived in New Jersey in the middle 1700's. He was born into a Quaker family and tried to live a life of simple, steady obedience in very troubled times. His journal tells what that was like. In one section of his journal, he tells about a vision he had during a time of serious illness.

I then heard a soft, melodious voice, more pure and harmonious than any I had heard with my ears before; I believed it was the voice of an angel who spoke to the other angels. The words were, "John Woolman is dead." I greatly wondered what that heavenly voice could mean.

I was then carried in spirit to the mines, where poor oppressed people were digging rich treasures for those called Christians, and heard them blaspheme the name of Christ, at which I was grieved, for his name to me was precious. Then I was informed that these heathens were told that those who oppressed them were the followers of Christ, and they said among themselves, "If Christ directed them to use us in this way, then Christ is a cruel tyrant."

[Then, after recovering physically]... at length I felt divine power prepare my mouth that I could speak, and then I said, "I am crucified with Christ, nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me, and the life I now live in the flesh [is] by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me" (Gal. 2:20). Then the mystery was opened, and I perceived there was joy in heaven over a sinner who had repented, and that the language "John Woolman is dead" meant no more than the death of my own will. (*Devotional Classics*, eds. Richard Foster and James Bryan Smith, 260)

I can remember in my early days of Bible-reading and prayer discovering this idea of “dying with Christ,” or “dying to sin.” I found it in the NT. I heard it in hymns: “Yes ’tis sweet to trust in Jesus, just from sin and self to cease.” It had been prayed over me in baptism: “May all sinful affections die in this Thy servant.”

I wasn’t aware of all of that at the time. But one day, reading my Bible, I prayed, “Help me die to sin and self.” And I felt like something was moving in my chest. Something about that kind of surrender meant that something was different and I could feel the change. I’ve prayed that prayer many times since and *haven’t* felt anything. But I keep trying to live in the reality of dying with Christ. I’ve prayed recently, “Help me die to sin and self—and stay dead.”

“But Christ lives in me.” The risen living Lord Jesus is now our life. As he was raised from the dead, in him we have been raised to newness of life. The new life we have after crucifixion is not our rightful possession. It’s a gift. It’s life from the Living One himself. Since “I” died in Christ’s death, the only life there now is, is the life of the risen Lord Jesus Christ. We live because of our intimate relationship with Christ, who lives in us by his Spirit.

Though I have died, I live and the life I now live in this present existence—in my body in this world—I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. Because Christ lives in me, I live by faith in him. Some interpret the phrase here to say, “the faithfulness of Christ.” That is, the faithfulness Jesus showed throughout his life and in going to the cross to die is what makes it possible for us to die with him and live a new life with him. We might say that we respond to the faithfulness of Jesus by putting our faith in him.

We don’t live by some general, generic faith. Faith has a specific object. Faith is “in” something. Our faith is in Jesus Christ, the faithful Son of God. Faith means trusting and totally abandoning ourselves to God in Jesus Christ. Faith is giving up on our attempts to get right with God on our own, giving up on running our own lives, giving up life apart from Christ—and trusting him to put us right with God, to lead us, to give us real life.

And we can trust him. He’s the one who loved us and gave his life for us. Notice how personal this is: “who loved *me* and gave himself for *me*.”

Do you have that assurance? Do you know not just that God loved the world and Christ died for everybody, but that God loves you and gave himself in the Son for you? Do you know that Jesus, the Son of God, loves you and gave his life for you? Will you trust him?

Finally, Paul tells his opponents that he doesn't deny the grace of God. Instead, he exalts God's grace. Because if being right with God could come through the law, Christ died for no reason. If we could save ourselves, Christ didn't need to die. But we can't, and he did. God's grace does for us what we can't do for ourselves.

Ed Spencer and a friend were walking along Lake Michigan one September evening in 1860. They learned that there had been a shipwreck on the lake and rescuers were needed. Ed Spencer was an experienced swimmer. He quickly kicked off his shoes, threw down his coat and dove into the water. He swam out and got a person from the wreck and swam them back to shore. Seventeen times he swam out and swam back, fighting the waves and the undertow. Toward the end he would collapse on the beach and think he couldn't go again. Then he would hear another cry for help and strength he didn't know he had surged up in him.

After the seventeenth person was rescued, Ed Spencer collapsed for the last time. The stress and the exposure damaged him. He never swam again. He was unable to continue his studies and eventually moved to California. He packed his entire life and all his health into that one night.

Near the end of his life, Ed Spencer shared his disappointment that none of the seventeen people he rescued returned to thank him. Still, Spencer did what he did because he was a follower of the One who packed his whole life—and ours—into six hours on a cross.

Could we be grateful for what Jesus did for us? Could we pack into our lives the spirit of what he did in those six hours on the cross? (Jim Buskirk, First UMC, Tulsa, audio cassette, no date; see also <http://archives.chicagotribune.com/1960/09/04/page/37/article/the-ordeal-of-edward-spencer>).

On Memorial Day we remember people who died serving our country. As we remember them and their sacrifice, as we are grateful for

them, let's remember the sacrifice of Jesus. Let's thank him and give ourselves to him.

What would Jesus do? What does Jesus do? He lays down his life to give new life to others. He fills us with his Spirit so that we can lay down our lives in witness and service and mission to help others know new life in Christ.

As followers of the One who gave himself on the cross, as those in whom he lives by his Spirit, we're called to accept his death for us and also to die with him. This dying and rising with Christ is an ongoing process that claims more and more of our life.