

# The Life of a True Christian

by Michael N. Bull

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## Gratitude

When a friend does something nice for us, or does us a favour, we feel happy. We are thankful for their thoughtfulness. If they have saved us from being hurt, we are even happier. We thank them again and again.

If someone has saved our life, we are truly grateful. There is nothing we can give them or do for them that will show how much we really, really appreciate what they did for us. We feel a debt of gratitude, an amazing feeling of happiness.

This feeling of thankfulness, of gratefulness, of gratitude, is what motivates true Christians. They are utterly convinced of the fact that their leader and Lord, Jesus Christ, has snatched them from death. They know that they will die, but they have a strong hope: a hope of life.

Christians have arrived at this deep thankfulness from many backgrounds. Some began their life with a motivation for money, others for power or praise. Some were even enemies of Jesus Christ and his cause. However, once they realised the truth of what had been done for them, their lives were completely changed.

One man – the Apostle Paul – said that he no longer lived for himself, but with a new and living belief and faith in Jesus Christ, “*who loved me, and gave himself for me.*” (Galatians 2:20) Paul’s absolute belief that Jesus had given his life *for Paul personally* changed him completely. He knew that Jesus died because of sin, not just the disobedience of all humanity, but because of Paul’s own wicked life in the past.

This knowledge was the force behind the energy and determination in the life of the Apostle. He was a tireless preacher; he was beaten (for example see 2 Corinthians 11:23-27), imprisoned, and shipwrecked, often tired, hungry and cold. All of this was because of Paul’s *love* and gratitude for what had been done for him.

The life a Christian should lead is motivated in the same way. Their every-day lives are changed because of the same sense of gratitude. Even though they cannot see in person the one who saved them, they know for certain that they have been rescued, just as much as someone who has been rescued from death in a purely human way.

## Not Followers of Rules

True Christians certainly do follow the laws of the land that they live in. This is an important teaching of the Bible (for example, Romans 13:1-7). They are also obedient to God, accepting his principles as moral and right.

Obedying rules and commands, however, is not a means for *earning* a reward. The word of God is emphatic on the subject (for example, Galatians 2:16-17; Romans 4:1-16). No matter what a disciple does, no matter how good he or she may seem to be, they are still a sinner, and worthy of death. The reward of God is not something to be earned by doing good. Instead, God's reward is his gift for those who simply believe him, and what he has promised.

This faith: the belief that what God says, he really means, is part of the motivating force for real disciples of Jesus. They know that the Bible has not set a standard of conduct as a means to obtaining a reward. Instead, there is an assurance that God deems those that trust in him and his promises as righteous. Their conduct is provoked by love and dependence on God, rather than by rules.

### **Obedience rather than Ritual**

If the keeping of rules is not essential to being saved, then is a disciple of Jesus obligated to do what is right? Is following God's teachings and ways important?

Yes; to obey God is crucial in the life of a true believer. He or she truly believes that God exists, that he has a deep love for mankind, and has given precious promises to those who have faith in him. This knowledge brings a responsibility to act in accordance with this belief. *Faith* requires *faithfulness*. To be convinced requires confident action. Such loyalty and dedication to a belief results in trustworthy and reliable service for those believers who accept God at his word.

The actions of a faithful Christian are therefore not motivated by ritual observances. Their lives are not shaped by rites or services or religious formalities. Instead, their actions can be compared to the obedience that a loving child gives to their parents. In the same way as human parents look for more than cold, ritualistic service and compliance, so followers of Jesus know that the living God desires loving obedience also.

An example in the Bible which illustrates this principle is when Saul, the first king of Israel, decided to save some animals for sacrifice to God, rather than destroy them as God had asked. Even though king Saul knew that he had not obeyed God, the excuse that he made was that the animals could be used in ritual sacrifice to God. The king was concerned only with the ritual to be performed, and was not motivated by devoted and loving obedience to God.

The prophet Samuel spoke God's word to king Saul in a message intended for all time:

*“Does the LORD delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as much as in obeying the voice of the LORD? To obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed is better than the fat of rams.”* (1 Samuel 15:22)

In a similar way, the rulers of the Jews in the days of Jesus' ministry held traditions in high esteem. The rules and customs alone drove their motivations, rather than affection for God. "*Why do your disciples break the traditions of the elders?*" (Matthew 15:2) they asked Jesus, with the assumption that these traditions that were of the greatest importance.

Jesus demonstrated that this was a wrong way of thinking and acting. In very strong language, he replied,

*"You hypocrites! Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you: 'These people honour me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men.'"* (Matthew 15:7-9)

By example, Jesus illustrated how his disciples should act, and the thought process behind such actions. In the same chapter of the Bible as the incident with the Jews and their traditions, Jesus said to his disciples:

*"I have compassion for these people; they have already been with me three days and have nothing to eat. I do not want to send them away hungry, or they may collapse on the way."* (Matthew 15:32)

Sincere Christians do not allow their lives to be directed by rites, rules and rituals, but by love.

### **A Christian's Status**

Disciples see themselves as servants, or *slaves* of Jesus Christ. They become conscious that in the past, they were slaves of their own cravings, of their own sin. They have renounced this slave owner: self. They have voluntarily become servants of a new master instead: Jesus Christ. They know that there is no service that they can achieve that will *earn* them God's gift. Nevertheless, their lives become lives of service to others, and specifically to their Lord.

The status of "servant" applies to all believers, no matter what their station in life. Jesus told those who were with him, "*whoever wants to be first must be your slave — just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve...*" (Matthew 20:27-28)

The essence of Jesus' teaching on the matter of service is shown when he told his followers, "*you also, when you have done everything you were told to do, should say, 'We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty.'*" (Luke 17:10)

Service is not something that comes naturally. "Me first" is instinctive for people all over the world. Service for others is something that is learned by example.

### **Faithfulness**

The morality of Christians is patterned on that of God and Jesus Christ. God's character, as shown by his message in the Bible, and by the life of Jesus Christ, establishes what Christians use as a model for their lives.

For example, God is faithful. He makes promises and keeps them. He does not abandon those who love him. He stands by those who are in trouble. God promised that the nation of Israel would never be destroyed, but other nations by contrast would disappear. He has been true to this promise as well as others.

A committed disciple knows this characteristic of God, and tries to be the same. He or she is faithful too. Promises that are made are kept, even if it is at a large personal cost (see Psalm 15:4). Husbands are faithful to their wives, and wives to their husbands, just as God is faithful to them. Friends that are in trouble are not abandoned, but helped.

Faithful service involves a change of attitude on the part of a believer. Tasks that are done for others are also carried out for God. Work for an employer is not *“to win their favour when their eye is on you, but like slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from your heart.”* (Ephesians 6:6)

### Peaceful Living

Sadly, many Christians through the centuries have not followed Bible teaching in regards to peaceful living. This does not change the obligation for such people. The counsel given in the Bible to pray that *“we may lead a quiet and peaceable life”* (1 Timothy 2:2), holds true.

This Bible teaching of peaceful living applies to all segments of a believer’s life. Such a person will avoid violent confrontations. Their preaching will be of a peaceful and not a quarrelsome nature.

*“Make every effort to live in peace with all men.”* (Hebrews 12:14)

An implication of such an injunction to live a peaceful life is that a disciple of Christ will not only be peaceable themselves, but will find ways to spread such peace to those around them. *“Blessed are the peacemakers,”* (Matthew 5:9 and 1 Peter 3:11) said Jesus, and the apostle Peter also advised, *“seek peace and pursue it.”*

God gives no guarantee that those who follow him will be free of trouble or persecution during their lives. This fact is most clear from the New Testament of the Bible, where many believers were mistreated or even killed. However, they did not *resist* evil, but often fled to other places and continued to preach, and live peaceful lives (see Acts 8:1-4, and Matthew 5:39).

Peace in the life of a disciple of Jesus is more than the absence of war or violence. It is the assurance that the promises of God are sure and certain. It is the confidence that continuing in this hope will result in a future inheritance as a gift from God.

### Kindness

God shows his love not only to those who are his friends, but to all mankind without partiality. As Jesus said, *“He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and unrighteous.”* God is kind not only to the good, but *“is kind to the ungrateful and wicked”* (Matthew 5:45 and Luke 6:35).

True Christians take this characteristic of God to heart. They are thoughtful and compassionate not only with their friends, but with others also, as they have opportunity.

They do things for people that do not even thank them. They are considerate to people whom others might call “unholy”, or “unclean”.

The awareness that God is kind to *them* inspires disciples to show the same to other people, whether it is their own family, their friends, or associates who they meet. The fact that God “*seeks out*” (Luke 15:4-28) those who are lost and need help, leads followers of Jesus to go out of their way to do the same and find people that are in need, and lend a hand.

### Justice

God does not favour one person or nation over another. As one disciple of Jesus exclaimed, “*I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism.*” (Acts 10:34) God shows impartiality to the rich and poor, male and female, no matter where they were born.

The implication is that true believers will be fair to every one also. They will not be prejudiced in their personal or business dealings. They will not help some people and discriminate against others.

This characteristic of justice is closely related to honesty. True believers do not lie, cheat, or steal. Instead they maintain honest balances and scales, and give a full day’s work and effort for each day’s wages (see Proverbs 11:1 and Deuteronomy 25:15). They work with diligence and enthusiasm whether their employer is watching or not. A disciple does not take advantage of those who are weak in order to gain an upper hand, whether for money, prestige or other reasons.

Instead, a true Christian looks for opportunities to provide justice and equity for those who are in need. He or she will go out of their way to remove oppression, cruelty or destitution, instead of passing by on the other side (Luke 10:29-36; Psalm 82:3; Deuteronomy 24:17-22).

### Humility

Those who follow Christ live lives of meekness because he was meek. Jesus showed the true spirit of lowliness in his own life. Although he was born to be a king, he was lowly *in heart*. He served and helped others, putting them before himself.

*“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”* (Matthew 11:28-30)

If the greatest man who ever lived could be gentle and humble in heart, and be a servant to others, then his followers will do the same. No matter what their position in life, they will put others before themselves. They will go out of their way for others, even to perform what might be thought as degrading tasks. True Christians do this because in their minds, they are doing this service for their master – Jesus.

There is a principle in the Bible which relates to humility. It is sometimes called “the cross before the crown”. It refers to the fact that Jesus had to suffer before he was raised from the dead in power. “*Here is a trustworthy saying: if we died with him, we will also live with him; if we endure, we will also reign with him*” (2 Timothy 2:11-12; see also

Romans 6:8). A disciple who is baptised in water is as if they are buried with Jesus in his death; rising up out of the water is like his resurrection from the tomb. It is not as if the disciple really dies. Instead, an old way of life has been killed; purposefully put to death. The disciple no longer lives his life to himself, but to God.

This change of life involves humility. It involves putting to death the natural desires: the need to satisfy one's self first, the aspiration to be above others, the desire for self-fulfilment. This is the life a true Christian should lead.

Making oneself lowly becomes a part of every day life. In practise it means taking second or even last place instead of instinctively wanting to be first. It means putting other people's interests ahead of one's own. It means self-sacrifice: doing without the things we want in favour of someone else.

Further, humility means accepting criticism or even punishment patiently. It means accepting such discipline whether the follower of Jesus deserves it or not! Again, the reason for such an attitude is because Jesus did the same.

“When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly” (1 Peter 2:23).

*“Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: 'It is mine to avenge; I will repay,' says the Lord. On the contrary; 'If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head.' Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.”* (Romans 12:19-21).

### Learning and Being Taught

Godly morality is not inherent in disciples of Jesus, or anyone else for that matter. How then does one come to a knowledge of right and wrong, of how to serve, of how to love?

A Godly life can be lived only by learning what such a life involves. Only then can one continue their life based on God's instruction and teaching.

This teaching comes only from the word of God himself — the Bible. Its teachings motivate and move the life of a true Christian into action. Without continuous learning, and reminders of what has been learned, it is easy to slowly move away from a Godly life. Here is the advice given to one disciple:

*“But as for you, continue in what you have learned and become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it, and how from infancy you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus”* (2 Timothy 3:14-15).

There is no substitute for learning the ways of godliness from the Bible, and from others who have been instructed by it. This was the pattern for those in Bible times. They were to teach one another, both by example, and by training others in the things of God.

*“The Lord's servant must not quarrel; instead he must be kind to everyone, able to teach, not resentful. Those who oppose him he must gently instruct, in the hope that God will grant them repentance leading them to a knowledge of the truth”* (2 Timothy 2:24-25).

*“Teach the older women to be reverent in the way they live, not to be slanderers or addicted to much wine, but to teach what is good. They can train the younger women to love their husbands and children, to be self-controlled and pure...” (Titus 2:3-5).*

There is no instant transformation for those who become Christians. Learning and growing is a life long progression. Such learning requires diligence and persistence. It includes bringing to remembrance things learned in the past, and continuing to gain knowledge to be applied daily.

This knowledge is not an end in itself. It is not a source of pride or arrogance. Just as a servant learns how to serve, so a true disciple of Christ learns how to serve him throughout a lifetime.

### **Set An Example**

Followers of God in the Bible did not live as solitary people, and there is no instruction in the Bible to live in this way. The opposite is true.

*“Set an example for the believers in speech, in life, in love, in faith and in purity” (1 Timothy 4:12).*

A true Christian is not afraid to be known as a follower of Jesus. Therefore, those who have dealings with such a person hold them to a higher standard than they may hold themselves. If the person slips, someone may say, “if you were really a Christian, you wouldn’t do that.”

We are familiar with the difference between light and darkness. Light makes things distinct; darkness obscures. Light uncovers secrets; darkness hides secret things. Light brings freedom of movement and vision; darkness brings groping and stumbling. Jesus told his followers:

*“You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.” (Mathew 5:14-16).*

Such an insight changes the life of a disciple. They realize that their life affects their children, their relatives, their school companions, their work mates, and those that they deal with frequently: those from whom they buy things, their neighbours and their friends. Their manner, the look on their face, their affection, their faithfulness, their honesty, their peacefulness, their love, shines forth as a radiant light.

There is a story of someone who once approached a Christian shopkeeper. “I would like to buy some of your salve”, asked the customer.

“What kind of salve are you looking for?” asked the shopkeeper.

“You are a Christian”, answered the customer. “I have noticed that your faces are always shining. You Christians must be using some kind of special salve.”

“No,” replied the shopkeeper, “we don’t use any special salve. Our faces shine because we are so sure of what the future holds. We know that no matter how difficult things are



now, God has made promises about our future that he is certain to keep. He is also near us and close to us each day.”

This little story illustrates the difference that a disciple of Jesus can make in the lives of those around them. The disciple can be a strong ray of light. They are the face of Jesus Christ to those who see them.

### **Bad Examples**

Throughout history since the time of the preaching of Jesus, Christians have not always acted in accordance with the example of their leader.

Some of them have professed to be Christians, but their actions showed otherwise. Some have come to various positions of power, and have abused such power. Many professing to belong to Christ have waged wars, imposed their religion by force, inflicted cruelty upon others, and ignored those who needed their help. The same can be said today in many cases, both for groups and individuals.

Does this mean that Christianity is wrong? Does the name or reputation of such people or groups mean that the Bible is wrong, or that Christianity is not worth following?

This is most assuredly not the case. Jesus himself told his followers that they should expect there to be both bad and good – together – until the day of his return. He told a story about a field where good seed had been planted. However, an enemy came and planted weeds. When the plants started to grow, it was difficult to distinguish between the good plants and the weeds. The owner of the field told his workers to leave the weeds to grow together with the good seed until the harvest, and only then would the two be separated.

A true follower of Jesus does not abandon his cause because other believers are not behaving as they should. They are true to their master, and as they have opportunity, help others to be faithful as well. They do not disdain other disciples, but help them as much as they can. They are patient, merciful and longsuffering because they know that God is like this too.

### **Worshipping with Others**

If at all possible, a true believer worships God with other disciples. Even if this is difficult because of personalities, distances, or health, such a person knows that there is joy and love when those who are in the light come together for the common purpose of worshipping God.

*“Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another.” (Hebrews 10:5)*

The Bible is plain that God’s intention is that believers unite together as a common body – like a human body. Every person is different, like the different parts of a body. Each has their unique function, just as a body has eyes, ears, arms, legs and toes. Just as a body feels pain, so a community of believers feels pain with one of its members. The whole body rejoices and is happy together as well.

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The community as a whole worships together also. They remember the sacrifice and resurrection of Jesus, as he has asked (Luke 22:19). They wait for his return together (Acts 1:11).

### **Prayer**

By no means last in importance, a true disciple prays to God often, for his care and help in living a life of service. The disciple admits freely to God when he has failed and sinned against him, and asks for forgiveness.

Praise and thankfulness plays a large part of the life of such Christians. They thank God not only for each meal, as Jesus did, but thank God daily for the blessings and benefits that they have.

They pray for the strength to continue in God's way. They pray when they are afraid, confused, depressed, happy, joyful, or contented. They pray for others by name.

Their hearts dance with elation, because they are completely confident that God is with them. They know that no matter what, God will keep his promises. And this gives them peace, a deep and true peace, no matter what happening in their lives.

**Michael N. Bull**