

The Christian's Life

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BASIC CHRISTIANITY SERIES

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New beginning

What Christians are

Present-day usage of the word 'Christian' is so broad that it can lead to misunderstanding, particularly in relation to the teaching of the Bible. Strictly speaking, Christians are Christ's people. They are Christians because they personally belong to Christ, not because they have been brought up in families or countries that follow Christian traditions.

The Bible most commonly refers to Christians as those who believe. They are believers not in the sense that they hold certain religious beliefs, but in the sense that they believe in, have faith in, and rely on Jesus Christ for their salvation. To have salvation (or to be saved) means to be forgiven their sins, saved from sin's penalty, and given that new and eternal life which is the life of the kingdom of God. This salvation is solely God's work, and he does it lovingly for believers even though they do not deserve it. They receive their salvation by faith, and in so doing are born anew by the work of the Spirit of God.

Besides exercising faith, believers exhibit repentance – a turning away from sin. Faith without repentance is not a faith that will save. There can be no forgiveness for those who will not turn from their sin. There must be a change, a conversion. Believers are now disciples or followers of Jesus, their new master, teacher and Lord. They live to please him, not themselves. In summary, 'when anyone is joined to Christ, he is a new being; the old is gone, the new has come (2 Corinthians 5:17). The Christian is a new person.

A basis for confidence

A common misunderstanding is that people cannot be certain of their salvation. Yet repeatedly the Bible shows that God wants

them to be certain. John is typical of the Bible writers when he says, 'I am writing this to you so that you may know that you have eternal life – you who believe in the Son of God' (1 John 5:13). Jesus emphasized the assurance believers can have, with such statements as 'I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish' (John 10:28). The promises of eternal security come from God himself, and his promises can be trusted.

Believers must remember always that their salvation depends not on anything they have done, but solely on what God has done for them through Christ. Only through Christ's death and resurrection are believers forgiven their sins and given new life. God welcomes them as he welcomes the victorious, risen Christ, and gives them the Holy Spirit as his mark of permanent ownership. Nothing can separate God's people from the love that God has shown to them through Jesus Christ.

Although God wants believers to be sure about their salvation, he does not want them to be cocksure. He does not want them to feel smug and self-satisfied. Perhaps that is why the Bible contains statements that sometimes make Christians feel uneasy. Christianity is more than intellectual belief. If faith does not produce a change in people's behaviour, it is not true faith. If people think their salvation is guaranteed and therefore they can do as they like, they deceive themselves.

Noticeable changes

People may or may not feel different when they first accept Christ, but if they are true believers they will soon become aware that their lives have been changed. They will want to please God, and will feel his rebukes when they are guilty of wrong attitudes or behaviour. Their values will begin to change as increasingly they love what is good and hate what is not.

Knowing that God is now their Father, believers will want to talk to him through prayer and listen to what he says through the Bible. They will also want to meet others in God's family and worship with them. They may find that they have less in

common with former friends, while at the same time they develop a love and concern for them (and even for their enemies) that they did not have before. All this is part of the growth that occurs in people's lives when they come into a relationship with the living Christ. Their character changes as it becomes progressively like the character of Christ.

Not only will believers themselves be aware of the change within them, but others also will notice the difference. People cannot be followers of Christ secretly. In New Testament times, when people said they believed in Jesus, they were promptly baptized to demonstrate the fact publicly. Baptism does not make people Christians; nevertheless, it is an essential part of their declaration that they are Christians.

Although the Bible speaks of people going into the water to be baptized, it gives no detailed description of the act of baptism. The original meaning of the word 'baptize' was or 'immerse' or 'dip', suggesting that believers were immersed in water. The ceremony was a public witness that they believed in Jesus, repented of their sins and received God's cleansing. It was their ceremonial introduction into Christianity.

The New Testament writers used the picture of baptism to teach aspects of Christian truth. Paul in particular developed the meaning of baptism in relation to the practical results of Christ's death, burial and resurrection. He showed that baptism pictured believers' union with Christ in dying to sin and rising with Christ to a new life of victory. Since Christ by his death paid the full penalty of sin for believers, sin can make no further demands on them. They are free from sin's power, and must live confidently in the power of the living Christ within them.

New and old natures

Being free from sin's power does not mean that when people become Christians they never sin again. Although the Holy Spirit now lives within them, the natural human tendency to do wrong is still there. Certainly, they have been born anew and been given

new life, but they still have the old sinful nature they were born with. The Bible calls this old nature 'the flesh'. It still wants to do wrong and so fights against the new nature. Christians therefore live with a constant conflict between these two natures.

This is no cause for despair. God has given the Holy Spirit to Christians to make Christ's living presence real to them. Jesus Christ, by his death and resurrection, conquered sin to free people from its power. Believers need no longer be slaves to the old sinful nature; but if they give way to it, it will bring them under its power again and rule them like a cruel tyrant.

Christians may at times wish that by some supernatural act the old sinful nature could be instantly eliminated. Or they may wish that the Holy Spirit within them could work like a magic charm and produce automatic victory over sin. God gives no such easy solutions to the problem of sin in the world. The Holy Spirit does not excuse Christians from self-discipline, but rather helps them develop it. Hard work is necessary in battling sin, and each victory strengthens character.

Having been saved by faith, Christians live by faith. If, in their desire to conquer sin, they make a set of rules for themselves or others to follow, they may find themselves no longer trusting in Christ, but caught in a new kind of bondage. Christ has set them free from all spiritual bondage, so that in union with him they may live the life of true freedom that Christ lived.

This freedom does not mean they are free from obedience to God and his Word. It means they are free to produce the quality of character that legal obedience can never produce. God has given commands and he requires obedience, but it is an obedience based on a relationship, not on laws. God is head of a family where love rules, and he wants his children to obey him because they want to, not because they are forced to.

Dealing with sin

Inevitably, Christians will at times fail. They must not think, however, that through their failure they lose their salvation and

have to start their Christian lives all over again. On being born anew they become God's children, and nothing can change that relationship. When children do wrong they may make their parents sad, but they do not cease to be their children. When Christians sin they make God sad, but they are still his children. God does not disown them, though he may discipline them. 'The Lord corrects those he loves, and punishes those he accepts as his children' (Hebrews 12:6).

Although wrongdoing cannot break the family relationship between parents and children, it can break the friendship. In a similar way the wrongdoing of Christians spoils their fellowship with God. All Christians sin sometimes, and if they deny this they deceive themselves. But if they are living to please God, they have his assurance of forgiveness for those sins that they themselves may not be aware of. If they are aware of sin, they should deal with it quickly and so maintain good fellowship with God. Again they have a sure promise: 'If we confess our sins to God, he will forgive our sins and purify us from all wrongdoing' (1 John 1:9).

Prayer

Freedom to pray

When people become God's children, they will naturally want to talk with him. Talking with God is what the Bible calls prayer. It is an act of living fellowship with God, through worshipping him, thanking him, praising him, confessing to him and making requests of him.

Believers can pray anywhere and at any time. They do not need any church building, church official or church book to be able to pray. Nor do they have to learn a special language. They can pray silently or audibly, in any position – standing, sitting, walking, kneeling. Knowing that God is with them everywhere, they will soon develop the habit of speaking with him freely regardless of time or place. They should also develop the habit of making time each day to be alone with God to pray. Even Jesus recognized the need to set aside time specifically for prayer.

Speaking silently to someone unseen may seem strange to those who do not know God, but when people become God's children this strangeness soon disappears. If they begin their regular prayer times by reading the Bible, their prayers will have more freshness and meaning. Prayer will be a response to what they learn from God through the Bible.

Confidence, with respect

Prayer is more than merely asking God for things. Jesus pointed out some of the chief elements in prayer when he gave his disciples some guidelines in what has become known as the Lord's Prayer (Matthew 6:9-13).

In simple everyday language, the main part of the prayer is as follows: 'Our Father in heaven, may your holy name be honoured, may your kingdom come, may your will be done on

earth as it is in heaven. Give us today the food we need. Forgive us the wrongs we have done, as we forgive the wrongs that others have done to us. Do not bring us to hard testing, but keep us safe from the Evil One.’

Jesus gave Christians this prayer not to provide them with words to repeat in a ritual, but to show them how to pray. And he shows that when Christians pray, though they may confidently make requests of God, they should also worship him. In fact, the prayer opens with an expression of worship.

Worship is difficult to define, for it is both an attitude in which believers live and an exercise that they carry out. They humble themselves before their Lord as those who serve, honour and adore him in acknowledgment of all that he is as the almighty and glorious God. That is why Christians, while they address God as their Father, address him also as the holy and majestic one who rules over all. Although they have a warm and close relationship with God, they also have a deep respect for him. They come before God with freedom and ease, but they do not take him for granted.

There is no suggestion, however, that Christians have to be solemn and dull in expressing their worship, or that they have to crawl to God to ask his favours. They come to him confidently because they are Christ’s people. Christ has made free access to God possible, and God welcomes Christians into his presence as he welcomed the victorious Christ.

Praise and thanksgiving are inseparable from worship. As believers praise God for all that he is and thank him for all that he has done, they will find that their lives and their prayers are full of joy.

What to pray about

In telling Christians to pray that God’s kingdom will come, Jesus shows that Christians should want people and nations to acknowledge God’s authority. Jesus taught often about the kingdom of God, pointing out that it is not a territory over which

God reigns, but the rule that he exercises. Christians should pray for this rule in their own lives and in the lives of others, whether in individuals, in nations, or in the world at large. In other words, they should pray for God's will to be done on earth as it is in heaven.

Jesus' prayer goes on to show that, though prayer is concerned with these timeless and worldwide matters, it is concerned also with the most ordinary and everyday matters, such as the provision of food to eat. No areas of life are too great or too small to pray about. In addition to physical needs there are spiritual needs; therefore, Jesus shows that prayer should include confession of sin. But people can expect forgiveness only if they have first forgiven those who have wronged them. They are to love those who ill-treat them and are to pray for them.

Each day brings fresh difficulties, but Christians have the assurance that they need not fight their battles alone. Jesus encourages them to ask God's help in these matters, so that when they meet troubles and testings, they will not fall into wrongdoing. Through prayer they can learn how to trust in God and not be anxious.

Often a prayer will end with a further expression of praise to God, such as 'for yours is the kingdom, the power and the glory'. It may close with the word 'amen'. In its original language the word 'amen' meant 'certain' or 'true', and was used to confirm the truth of a statement or express agreement with it. When used thoughtfully, 'amen' can express the sincerity of the person who is praying or the agreement of one who is listening. Either way it means, 'Yes, Lord, may it be so'.

Total dependence on God

By their prayers Christians acknowledge that they have no power to bring about the things they are praying for, but God has. Their prayers are not a way of trying to force God to do what they want; on the contrary, their prayers are an admission of their helplessness and complete dependence on God. By their

prayers they are inviting God to work out his answer to the matter they are praying about.

The answer to prayer does not depend on the zeal or will-power of the person praying, but on the wisdom and power of God. God does not want people to work up feelings of one sort or another. He wants them simply to trust in him. The merit is not in the prayer itself, but in God who answers the prayer. Christians can pray in the right spirit only when they recognize their helplessness, and trust God to do what they cannot. Faith is the basic requirement of all prayer.

People do not need large amounts of faith in order to pray. They need only enough faith to turn in their helplessness to God. Like prayer, faith has no merit in itself. That is, God does not need people's faith to help him do things. God has complete power within himself. Faith is simply the means by which believers come to him and ask him to exercise that power.

No automatic answers

Since faith is the basis of prayer, people cannot use prayer to get their own way; for then they would be arrogantly commanding God instead of humbly submitting to him. They would be wanting their will to be done instead of God's. Christians are assured that God answers their prayers when they pray in Jesus' name. This does not mean that they merely add the words 'in Jesus' name' to their prayers. Rather it means that they pray on the authority Jesus gives them, and ask for things that have Jesus' approval.

There is no formula that guarantees answers to prayer regardless of the way people live. Christians must understand God's Word so that they can live in obedience to his teachings and learn to pray for the right things. Unchristian conduct and unchristian attitudes are among the causes of unanswered prayer. A disciple of Jesus who became a leading teacher in the early church once wrote, 'We receive from God whatever we ask, because we obey his commands and do what pleases him.' 'We

are sure that he hears us if we ask him for anything that is according to his will' (1 John 3:22; 5:14).

At times, however, God may choose not to give his people what they ask for, even when they are not guilty of disobedience or selfishness. The reason may be that he has something better for them. Having perfect knowledge, he knows what is best. He may therefore give believers what they would have asked for if they had the full knowledge that God has. These better answers are not always immediately obvious, and therefore patience is a necessary part of true prayer.

An understanding Father

Jesus and the New Testament writers repeatedly mention the need for persistence in prayer. This is not because God needs to be persuaded. Christians do not have to beg from a God who is unwilling to give, but they do have to exercise a constant trust in him. Faith is not an occasional exercise that makes a call for supernatural aid and then forgets the matter. Faith involves perseverance. By their constant prayers, Christians express their unwavering faith in their heavenly Father.

Prayer is one way that God trains his children in the development of Christian character. Although he lovingly gives them much without their asking, there are many things they will learn only by asking. They will learn some things only through having their requests refused, but even then they can be confident that a wise and loving Father is always working for their good.

When Jesus says to his followers, 'Your Father already knows what you need before you ask him', he is not telling them they have no need to pray. On the contrary he is giving them good reason to pray. Christians pray to a Father who understands their needs better than they do themselves (Matthew 6:8).

Serving God

A privileged relationship

When people come into the kingdom of God, they become subjects of their new King, servants of their new Lord. To present-day people, for whom human dignity and freedom are important issues, this may at first sound harsh and unattractive, especially when we remember that servants in the first century were more likely slaves.

No illustration can properly picture the relationship between God and his people. The Bible uses many word-pictures, parables and examples to deal with various aspects of the Christian life, but they are all inadequate and they are all independent of each other. In speaking of Christians in their responsibilities to God, the Bible uses such widely differing illustrations as children, servants, friends, ambassadors, soldiers, witnesses, farmers, builders and athletes.

Jesus was well aware that each illustration could help explain one point, but could lead to misunderstanding if applied to another. For example, he frequently used the illustration of servants, and he demanded from his disciples the faithfulness of servants to their master. But in another setting he said, 'I do not call you servants, for a servant does not know what his master is doing. Instead I call you friends' (John 15:15). No picture by itself can tell the full story. Christ's servants are also his friends. Allegiance to him leads to freedom; service for him is a privilege.

However, there is no place for pride in Christian service. Jesus showed this when he, the master, washed his servants' feet. He was the perfect servant of God, and he showed that serving God means also serving one's fellow human beings. God gives honour only to those who have first learnt to serve.

Something all can do

As their new life develops, Christians may give evidence that God is preparing them to serve him in specific ways. Such service may lie in the future, but in the meantime they should not sit idle waiting to receive some special message from God. There are some things that all Christians should do, regardless of any special abilities they might have.

An obvious way that all Christians can serve God is through prayer. They can do this privately or by joining with like-minded friends. In this service their prayers go beyond their personal needs to the needs of others. They can pray for those who are sad, lonely, suffering, hungry, poor, distressed or persecuted. Likewise they can pray for those who govern nations, administer justice, direct welfare and provide education. In fact, the list of things to pray for is endless.

In particular, Christians should be concerned for the spiritual needs of the world, and the Bible gives them many things to pray for. They are to pray that God will send his servants everywhere with the good news of salvation, that he will guide and protect those servants, and that he will make their work fruitful. They are to pray for churches and individuals, that God's people might know him better, be strengthened by his power, have unity among themselves, increase in love, develop wisdom and endure hardship. They are to pray both for those who are known personally to them and for those who are not.

The more facts people have, the more intelligently they will pray. Christians should therefore find out all they can about Christian work, and perhaps keep a notebook where they can write down things to pray for. One of the greatest of all Christian workers, Paul, once said to a group of Christians, 'You help us by means of your prayers for us' (2 Corinthians 1:11).

Representatives for Christ

People who become united with Christ soon develop attitudes and behaviour that make them different from people in

general. But they should not be different in a merely negative sense, as if their chief concern is to disagree with or criticize others. They have a positive responsibility to be a good and wholesome influence in a society that has been corrupted by sin. More than that, they are to bring others to know Christ too, and if they are to do this they must not only live uprightly, but also tell people about the person whom they serve.

The Bible speaks of Christians as Christ's ambassadors. As an ambassador represents his country's ruler or government in a foreign land, so Christians represent Christ in the world. Because of this they are, in some ways, different from the people among whom they live. Their standards are those of another kingdom, Christ's. But they must not cut themselves off from the life of the society; otherwise they will not be able to present their master's point of view to the people.

Christians need to maintain a balance, and in this Jesus Christ is their example. He mixed so freely in society that the religious purists criticized him; but he never lowered his standards or changed his beliefs to make life easier for himself.

All Christians can serve Christ by living for him. They are (according to illustrations that Christ himself gave) like a city on a hill, for they cannot be hidden, and like salt on meat, for they help prevent decay and add flavour to society. They are like lamps in a house, for they give light to those who otherwise would be in darkness. They are like witnesses in a courtroom, for they speak openly and forthrightly of what they know and have experienced.

Using what God has given

As they read the Bible, Christians soon see that God is the giver of everything they have for the maintenance and enjoyment of life – life itself, the physical environment, time, possessions and natural skills. They recognize that they have no absolute right to these things. They have them on trust from God, and they are answerable to God for the way they use them.

Christians have a responsibility to use their time, money and abilities to help others, and in so doing they serve God. This will often involve sacrifice; in fact, only when it is a sacrifice does it have value in God's sight. There is little merit if people give away only what they themselves do not need. God always looks at hidden motives rather than what the onlookers see. Sometimes people may give money because they genuinely want to help those in need; other times they may give money because it is easier than sacrificing their time and convenience.

The motivating force in Christian giving is Jesus Christ, who gave everything to save helpless sinners. Paul referred to the example of Jesus Christ when urging Christians in Greece to contribute money to help poor Christians in Jerusalem. He encouraged each person to think carefully about the matter, and regularly to 'put aside some money in proportion to what he has earned'. But Paul refused to specify the percentage that each person should give. That is for individual Christians to work out before God. God wants them to give, and to give generously, but not under compulsion. 'Each one should give as he has decided, not with regret or out of a sense of duty; for God loves the one who gives gladly' (2 Corinthians 9:7).

Some Christians use the whole of their working time in such tasks as making known the good news of God's salvation, caring for churches, teaching believers and looking after church welfare programs. Christians have a responsibility to support such people financially. By giving in this way, Christians serve God themselves and have a share in the service that others carry out on their behalf.

Christians and work

Perhaps the most constant of all Christian service is the one that is common to all Christians at all times, namely, work. This applies not just to earning money, but also to work around the house, study, volunteer welfare work and just about every other kind of worthwhile activity. 'Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as though you were working for the Lord . . . as

though you were serving Christ' (Colossians 3:23; Ephesians 6:5-8).

From the beginning, God intended people to work, so that as they learnt new skills and exercised their judgment they would mature in body and mind. But when sin entered the world, everything was affected. It is not work that is the result of sin, but the pain, drudgery and oppression that come from work in a world dominated by sin. Christians are people who have been restored to God, and consequently they develop a new attitude to work.

Because they are set free from sin, Christians are set free from the drudgery of work, but they are not free from work itself. They still have to work hard and can expect weariness and pain the same as anyone else, but they take a new interest and pride in whatever they do. If their aim is to please Christ, they will find satisfaction in doing all tasks well, even tasks that they normally may not like.

Jesus once said, 'You cannot serve both God and money' (Matthew 6:24). If Christians work only to get income, they are not serving Christ. This is true of those who take no interest in the work they are doing because they think it boring, and of those who are totally immersed in their work because they want status and prosperity. Just as trust in God is no excuse for lazy idleness, so diligence for God is no excuse for selfish ambition. Neither path leads to satisfaction. As always, Christians find true satisfaction as they work and live not for themselves, but for Christ.

Towards maturity

Christ working in his people

As Christ promised, those who receive him receive also eternal life. When the Bible speaks of eternal life, its main emphasis is not on everlasting existence in the afterlife, but on the life of the kingdom of God, the life that is part of the nature of God himself. On receiving Christ, people begin this new life now. It is the life that Christians receive when they come into union with Christ, when they acknowledge him as their Lord and Saviour and enter his kingdom. It will be theirs for ever, because even death cannot break their union with Christ.

Christians' enjoyment of this eternal life is at present limited because of the natural imperfections they share with everything else in the present world. But Christ, by the perfect life he lived, gave an indication of the quality of life that God desires people to have and that those in his kingdom can begin working towards now. When Christ comes into the lives of his people, he begins the work of changing them to be like him.

Growth is therefore a chief characteristic of the Christian life. The Bible often speaks of Christians' spiritual growth by means of illustrations relating to physical growth. Because children naturally grow into adults, there is something unnatural about Christians who remain spiritual children. Paul reminds Christians of God's purposes for them when he says that all who have come into union with Christ should 'become mature people, reaching to the very height of Christ's full stature. Then we shall no longer be children' (Ephesians 4:13-14).

Food that strengthens

Several of the New Testament writers use the illustration of food when speaking of Christian growth. Children begin life by

being fed on milk, but they soon move on to solid food. Likewise Christians begin their lives by being given basic teaching, but they soon move on to more advanced teaching. Their spiritual food is the Bible, and they will grow only as they read it, understand it and apply it.

Christians should be diligent in their Bible reading, because through the Bible God makes himself known to them. Without an understanding of the Bible, they will not know what sort of person God is or what he has to say about Christian living.

The entire Bible is God's Word, and although some parts may be easier to understand than others, Christians should not hinder their growth by reading only the easier parts. As physical effort develops the body, so mental effort develops the mind. Christians will find that the more they understand the Bible, the greater is their capacity for further growth.

An old biblical proverb says, 'Wise people get all the knowledge they can' (Proverbs 10:14), and wise Christians will regularly set aside time to study the Bible. Even when they see no immediate relevance in a particular part of the Bible, they will keep reading. They will not read the Bible as others read the astrology columns of the daily newspaper – looking for words of special guidance about each day's events. Rather they will read it with the aim of building up their knowledge over as wide an area as possible, so that they will be well prepared no matter what circumstances they meet.

Deciding what to do

One sign of a developing Christian life is the ability to apply the teachings of the Bible to the common issues of everyday life. The Bible gives moral guidelines, but it does not provide clear-cut answers for all the decisions people must make.

If, for example, people are thinking about what occupation they should follow or where they should live, they cannot expect the Bible to tell them. But neither should they think the Bible has nothing to say on such matters. The Bible contains all sorts of

teachings about honesty, consideration for others, morality, self-denial and the like, and these should affect the way Christians think. Sometimes all that is needed is a definite 'No' (for the proposal may be clearly against the Bible's teaching); other times there is no easy answer at all.

Christianity does not provide simple formulas to be used for people's convenience. True, it promises God's help in life's decisions, but only to those who make every effort to live to please God rather than themselves. Such people find that through prayer and the Scriptures their outlook on life changes. They begin to exercise their Christian discernment, and the more they do so the more their confidence grows.

This Christian discernment is more than common sense, for common sense can be selfish and does not necessarily consider God's values. Christian discernment is what the Bible calls spiritual wisdom. It is what Paul prayed for when he wrote to one of the early churches: 'true wisdom and perfect judgment, so that you will be able to choose what is best'. Paul went on to describe the result of this developing Christian maturity: 'your lives will be filled with the truly good qualities which only Jesus Christ can produce' (Philippians 1:9-11).

Becoming like Christ

A consistent theme in the New Testament is that the Spirit of God is at work in Christians to make them more like Christ. The pity is that, because the world of Jesus was the world of almost two thousand years ago, people often think of Christianity as something old fashioned. Consequently, they think that to be like Christ means to be out of date and unfitted for the modern world.

In speaking about Christians' likeness to Christ, the Bible is concerned mainly with the quality of Christ's character that his people should reproduce. When faced with difficult questions, Christians do not necessarily ask themselves, 'What would Jesus do?' There are many things that Christian husbands, fathers, mothers, scientists, lawyers and soldiers do that we may not

imagine Jesus doing, but that in itself does not make those things wrong. Jesus' calling in life was unique, but Christians are to be as faithful to God in their callings as Jesus was in his. They are to show the same attitudes as he showed.

Several times Jesus told his disciples that just as he had been persecuted, so they would be persecuted. His behaviour on such occasions was an example to them of the tolerant and forgiving spirit that he wanted to produce in them. He showed that although obedience to God may lead to hardship, suffering and death, they had to learn to say 'No' to their own wills and 'Yes' to the Father's will, as Jesus did. People naturally do not like to think about suffering, but it is something that God uses to bring his people to full maturity.

A balanced life

Maturity comes not only through the way people endure life's sufferings, but also through the way they enjoy life's pleasures. Jesus was not opposed to a full-blooded enjoyment of life, and neither were the Old Testament or New Testament writers. On the contrary, God is the one who 'generously gives us everything for our enjoyment' (1 Timothy 6:17). What Jesus and the Bible writers opposed was a wrong use of the things God has given. When people ignore his commandments, think only of themselves or exploit others, they displease God and in the end ruin themselves.

It is true that on one occasion Jesus told a rich young man to sell all that he had and give the money to the poor, but the reason was that the man's wealth was his god. Jesus did not tell all rich people to sell their possessions. His emphasis was that those who followed him had to be prepared to sacrifice anything if God so required, but he was not opposed to the proper enjoyment of the good things of life. In fact, the religious killjoys of his day constantly criticized him for being too free in the way he lived.

The abuse of God's gifts by some people is no reason for Christians to reject those gifts. Christians should be examples of

a sensible lifestyle. They should be neither so anti-enjoyment that they misrepresent Christ, nor so ill-disciplined that they mislead others. Neither attitude is a sign of spiritual maturity.

A temptation that growing Christians face is to think that with increased knowledge there is less need for self-discipline. A common feeling in society at large is that it is a sign of adulthood not to be easily shocked by behaviour that breaks God's moral law. In other words, to be mature means to see no difference between what is wholesome and what is unwholesome. According to the Bible, it is the opposite that is a sign of maturity: the ability to make a discerning judgment, and then act upon it. The mature Christians, the 'adults', are those 'who through practice are able to distinguish between good and evil' (Hebrews 5:14).