



CORRESPONDENCE COURSE

Lesson 18

CHRISTIAN DISCIPLESHIP (4) — RELATIONS WITH THOSE AROUND US

Jesus Christ tells us that all his teaching can be summed up in two commandments: “Love God” and “Love your neighbour” (Matthew 22:34-40).

He also said, *“Whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them”* (Matthew 7:12). The Apostle John wrote, *“He who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen . . . Whoever loves God must also love his brother”* (1 John 4:20,21).

We see that the test of Christian discipleship is whether we love those around us. There are different kinds of love. Sexual love, love of friends and love of family belong to our normal human nature. They are natural to us. It is also natural to love ourselves; we have no difficulty in caring for our own needs, and being concerned about our own welfare.

Christian love requires us to love others, even though they may not be attractive or lovable, in the same way as we love ourselves. The idea is simple, but to do it is not so easy. It means reversing our natural instinct, which is to put our own needs first. Instead we must put the needs of others before our own: *“Let no one seek his own good, but the good of his neighbour”* (1 Corinthians 10:24).

As well as having compassion and concern for others, we must be truthful, honest and fair-minded in our dealings with others if we wish to be pleasing to God. There are situations where it is not easy to see clearly how to put these principles into practice. It is especially difficult, when jobs are hard to find, to work honestly for bosses who turn out to be corrupt. If possible, we should avoid joining company with others who see nothing wrong in doing things which we know do not please God.

Business standards

In some businesses, the drive for profit does not result in care for people. Workers are exploited. Little compassion is shown for their personal and family needs. In many businesses there is dishonesty in management, bribery is used to secure contracts, accounts are not a true record of what has happened. To work in such organisations is very hard for those who serve Christ. We are told to be honest and to give of our best (Ephesians 6:5-8). Sometimes it is better to be without a job, however hard, than to be in a situation in which we cannot be honest and fair. For this reason, we should be very careful about entering into any business partnerships with people who do not share our values.

Trade unions and professional associations

In some companies we may be expected to join a ‘trade union’. Trade unions, professional associations and other similar organisations generally exist to exert pressure on behalf of their members for better working conditions, increased pay, and greater influence within the organisation. It is true that such groups also do good in providing welfare, and maintaining safe working practices. Many employers prefer their workers to be trade union members. But we should avoid getting into situations in which we are expected to join a protest or withdraw our labour to force change.

A follower of Christ must not “fight” for rights or for more money or better conditions. Paul wrote, *“I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content”* (Philippians 4:11). Peter tells us: *“Servants, be subject to your masters with all respect, not only to the good and gentle but also to the unjust. For this is a gracious thing, when, mindful of God, one endures sorrows while suffering unjustly”* (1 Peter 2:18-19).

The state

The Bible shows us how we should relate to whatever government we live under:

“Be subject for the Lord’s sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme, or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good . . . Live . . . as servants of God. Honour everyone. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honour the emperor” (1 Peter 2:13-17).

Another passage is similar:

“Therefore one must be in subjection (to the authorities), not only to avoid God’s wrath but also for the sake of conscience. For because of this you also pay taxes, for the authorities are ministers of God, attending to this very thing. Pay to all of them what is owed to them . . .” (Romans 13:5-7)

Jesus himself lived in a country which had been overrun by foreigners; the Romans were rulers. Many Jews wanted to rebel and fight to make the land free, but Jesus never gave any encouragement to them. He accepted the rule of Rome, no matter how harsh it might be. When challenged about paying taxes to Rome, he asked for a coin, and said, *“Whose likeness and inscription is this?” “Caesar’s,” they replied. Then he said to them, “Therefore render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s” (Matthew 22:17-22).*

Jesus had not come to free the Jewish nation from their political masters; his purpose was to prepare them for the coming Kingdom of God. But the time for that Kingdom was not yet, and until it came, Jesus accepted the government of men, unless it conflicted with the laws of God. An example of such conflict is shown in Acts 4:18-20, when the apostles Peter and John refused to obey the command of the authorities to stop preaching about Jesus.

World rulers hold their position only because God allows them to do so, and only until they have served His purposes. Men may try to change the world for the better by their own efforts, or by joining others who would like to do so, but there will be no real change until the Lord Jesus returns. A true Christian accepts this, believing that God knows and understands our present problems, which can only be solved by the coming of His Kingdom.

Social issues

Just as Jesus never became involved in the politics of his day, so the disciple of Christ will refuse to take an active part in the politics of his country. He will not take part in campaigns to bring about reforms, however desirable they may seem to be.

The example of Paul is helpful. Slavery was a social evil of his day, but Paul did not campaign against it, or condemn slave holders as evil men. He taught that Christian masters should treat their slaves with consideration, and their Christian slaves as brothers. Equally, he taught that Christian slaves should serve their masters to the best of their ability, as if serving Christ (Colossians 3:22 - 4:1).

Living as a Christian

Remember that God has given the disciples of Christ a special work to do. It is their privilege to preach the good news of his coming Kingdom to all who will hear (Mark 16:15). They are the heralds of this kingdom. They tell people about the return of the Lord Jesus Christ, who will solve the problems of the world and govern it in peace and righteousness.

However, if they themselves are busy making money in dishonest or selfish ways or enjoying themselves with no regard for others’ needs, the people they talk to will not take them very seriously.

But if they try to live as Christ and the apostles lived, making an honest living, offending no-one, helping those they can, spreading God’s word, and obeying the laws of the land while giving priority to the laws of God, then there may be some who will understand and turn to God.

“Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.” (Matthew 5:16)

Questions

T1. What can we learn about the Christian’s behaviour in society from the example of Christ?

T2. How should the promise of Christ’s return affect the way we live in society?