

## 79 – The New Covenant

John 14: 15-24

Have you ever wondered why so many individuals who claim to be Christians behave so badly? In some cases, large numbers of so-called Christians have behaved worse than unbelievers and some even at a level of evil explainable only by demonic influence. Have you ever been reading a history book or watching a documentary only to suddenly realize that the horror being described was perpetrated by people who called themselves Christians? Or, have you noticed that with sad regularity a Christian leader will be caught doing something awful? It's unnerving. It's discouraging. It leaves a person wondering if Christianity is true. If it does what it says it does, then why isn't it making its followers more like its Founder? Where's the change? Where's God? Where's the miracle?

In my opinion, this is the most serious charge against Christianity. These glaring failures make it appear that our faith is just one more set of religious teachings, one more philosophy among all the other teachings and philosophies in the world. Yet, to be fair, we have to point out that while some Christians and so-called Christian societies have behaved badly, there have been individuals and communities of believers who have loved and served their Lord with amazing sincerity and selflessness. Most of us know someone whose life reveals miraculous change. No one can deny that something really happened to that person.

So the question is: Why are some people who call themselves Christians becoming so much like Jesus, while others who also call themselves Christians behave no differently, or even worse, than unbelievers? As we read through John's report of the disciples' final evening with Jesus, we can hear in the Lord's voice great expectation for the future. He clearly expected those disciples to change and become like Him. He knew that change hadn't happened yet, but He was sure a miracle would happen to them after His cross and resurrection, one that would leave them different, empowered and, above all, obedient to God. As He served them the bread and cup from the Passover table that evening, He gave a name to that miracle. He called it the "new covenant." He said it would transform rebellious, selfish, independent people into obedient, loving, humble disciples. That miracle was something God had promised as far back as Moses. The prophets said it was a gift that the Messiah would bring to all who would truly repent and believe.

I think this miracle, or miracles, that Jesus called the "new covenant" is what causes some people to become real Christians and others to be Christians in name only. The lack of it helps explain the hypocrisy we read about in history and the absence of a conscience in certain individuals. Actually, the Christianity Jesus envisioned that night can't exist apart from it. Everything He and His apostles taught was designed only for people who had entered this new covenant, for people to whom God had given a new heart.

### **Prophetic promises**

DBS (Weds-Sat)

### **The problem with grace**

Christianity replaces the covenant God made with Israel at Sinai with a new covenant; it replaces the Law of Moses with grace, which is the gift of God's righteousness. But grace is appropriate only for those who have a new heart, one upon which God has miraculously written His Law. The Law of Moses is based on curses and blessings, threats and rewards. It motivates right behavior by appealing to the flesh, but if a person's heart has not been changed, threats and rewards are the only way their behavior can be controlled because they are still, by nature, rebellious, selfish and independent. Grace will actually produce lawlessness if the heart is not transformed. It removes the fear of God and assures a person that they will go to heaven regardless of their horrible behavior. In many ways grace produces worse results than no religion because it overrides the natural restraint of the conscience. What a person might have been afraid to do, grace assures them will be forgiven. It can produce even worse character than legalism because it removes any fear of punishment.

The grace of God is meant to be given to the person who has been miraculously changed inside, to the person who loves God and wants to please Him. That person does not need threats or rewards to do the right thing. A transformed heart needs only to be taught how to obey, how to break free from the control of the flesh or escape the assaults of the devil. Like obedient children, those with a new heart seek to be nurtured and trained by their heavenly Father.

Because the gospel has often been stripped of its essential demands, many people have been misled into thinking that they are right with God and that for them, the Law has passed away. So, they have tried to function in the freedom that Christ gives only to turn that freedom into an opportunity for the flesh and fall into deeper bondage than before (Gal 5:13).



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## Another Helper

No sooner had Jesus said, "If you love Me, you will keep My commandments" (v15) than He said this, "I will ask the Father and He will give you another Helper, so that He may be with you into the [next] age..." (v16). The Greek word translated as "Helper" is *paraklete*. It is that person who comes to help us when we call out in need. He was speaking about the Holy Spirit. He said the Holy Spirit was Someone they already knew because He had been *with* them, but He would soon take up residence *inside* them. This step, which He described elsewhere as a baptism with the Holy Spirit (Ac 1:5) is absolutely foundational to the new covenant Jesus was promising. In effect, He was saying, "Not only will you be given a new heart, you will also be given new power which will make it possible for you to obey My commands." They would not only *want* to do the right thing, they would *be able* to do the right thing.

But the process of helping people receive this power has been neglected over the centuries as least as badly as the essential demands of the gospel. Even those who repent and believe, and are thereby given a new heart, may often be left without help to receive the baptism with the Holy Spirit, which brings the power and divine guidance needed to live the righteous, fruitful life Jesus envisioned. Instead, new believers are often inundated with teaching, which they lack the power to obey. So, old behaviors may continue or even grow worse; demonic harassment may increase yet the person has no understanding of how to stop it, and prayers for help seemingly go unanswered. Some stop trying to change, some give up the faith and some hide their private lives and hope for a miracle. This problem of powerless Christianity is so longstanding and widespread that many think this is all Christianity has to offer. But it's not.

## The prophet's promise

The Christianity Jesus expected us to proclaim offers both a new heart and new power. And the promise that God would send both is deeply rooted in Scripture. Moses described this miracle. He looked forward to the day in which God would "circumcise [the] hearts" of His people (Dt 30:6). That means God will supernaturally remove the rebellion, selfishness and independence that's found in every human heart. Jeremiah called this miracle a "new covenant" (Jer 31:31). Here's what he said this new covenant would do:

"But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days," declares the Lord, "I will put My law within them and on their heart I will write it, and I will be their God, and they shall be My people. They shall not teach again, each man his brother, saying, "Know the Lord," for they shall all know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them," declares the Lord, "for I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more." (Jer 31:33, 34)

Ezekiel explained how this miracle would take place. Through him, God said,

"I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes (permanent rules), and you will be careful to observe My ordinances (prescribed rituals)." (Eze 36:27)

So, there it is: a new heart and new power, the desire to obey and the ability to obey. And both are still available if we truly respond to the demands of the gospel (repent and believe), and if we actively welcome the Holy Spirit to come and take up His residence inside us. Then, it's a matter of learning to walk in the grace and power He has given us.

## The bread and the cup (Lk 22:14-20)

With these truths in mind, let's listen carefully to what Jesus said to His disciples during the Passover meal on that final evening. First He took some bread and explained that He, like the Passover lamb, would die for them, and then He picked up the cup that is served after the meal has been eaten. It's called the "cup of redemption." He held up that cup and said,

"This cup which is poured out for you is the new covenant in My blood" (Lk 22:20).

In other words, "My cross and resurrection will bring you the promised new covenant."

Today, as we take communion together, let's join those disciples at that table. And when the bread and cup are passed to us, let's receive that new covenant, let's receive the new heart and the new power that He died to give us.

## Questions

1. Some of us have grown up in Christianity, so it may be difficult to identify a beginning point in our walk with God. But when would you say your heart changed? When did you realize that you really loved Him and wanted to obey Him?
2. Have you received the baptism with the Holy Spirit? Was there a moment when you knew He had come to live inside you? Tell us how you knew.