

The Simplicity of an Ordered Life (various scriptures)

The last time we were together, we considered the implications of leaning more into a kingdom based expression of church meaning the gathered followers of Jesus in a local community. We reflected on the idea that the goal, or outcome desired in that approach wasn't necessarily a beautiful campus boasting a range of programming offering concert quality worship services. Instead we saw that the desired product, or objective, is you—individuals living the beautiful life of Jesus day to day and gathering for the purpose of affirming this in one another while encouraging each other in living that life. Everything else a church does flows out of that, otherwise nothing else we do really matters in the overall purpose of God.

Leaning into a kingdom based approach for church amid all the disorientation we're experiencing in this challenging time can seem uncomfortable. We're prone to overthinking what's required adding complexity to the mix—but it helps to remember Jesus' word from Matthew 11 that we frequently reference: 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.

The easy yoke of Jesus is where we find rest—where disorientation dissipates, and we discover how to live his life amid the jumble and hostility brewing around us. In this we find that our response to the challenges aimed our way by a critical culture is demonstration, rather than carefully crafted defense or apologetic; that our goal is persuasion rather than conquest, that winsomeness is more effective than caustic wit, and that beauty is more compelling than confrontation. So, how do we slip into that easy yoke of Jesus? I used to suggest holding three thoughts in mind: In Christ, like Christ, and for Christ by way of reminder of what motivates our life in Christ. But over time these ideas have shifted in my thought which I've found helpful—perhaps these will be helpful for you as well. I'd summarize them as the simplicity of an ordered life meaning that these ideas shape the contours of my life—they order an approach to life, which, led by Christ's spirit, will allow us to slip into the easy yoke. It's still three phrases but slightly altered: With Christ, like Christ, and from Christ.

The first phrase—with Christ—captures the sense of having the presence of Christ with us, rather than merely understanding our standing in Christ which speaks to a position, a reckoning that qualifies our right standing with God, which, of course, is critical and necessary. We should remember this, but practically speaking we tend to relegate this as a point of reference for future security; because we are in Christ we are not therefore subject to condemnation. With Christ personalizes our experience of Christ, that is, we are with Christ in terms of learning from him, but beyond this, Christ is with us in all of our experiences. This reality is something Jesus led his disciples to grasp when he was present with them amid calamity. Remember the time the boat they were in was being swamped in a storm and Jesus was asleep in the stern. The anxious disciples awakened him with the accusation, "don't you care if we drown?" And his reply was, "where is your faith?" With a word, Jesus calmed the storm. The Emmaus road travelers experienced the presence of Jesus without knowing it precisely. When it became clear to them, they remembered how their hearts were aflame, kindled into life and hope amid their despair as he talked with them and opened the scriptures to them. His presence affected them. Peter and John caught that reality when they were brought before the Sanhedrin—the religious Supreme Court of their day—on charges that they were announcing the resurrection of Jesus despite the Court's rejection of him. When the court saw the courage of Peter and John, according to Acts 4, they were astonished and took note that these men had been with Jesus. More importantly, Peter and John knew that Jesus was with them in that moment. Over and over again Jesus emphasized, where two or three are gathered in my Name, there am I in their midst. In one of his closing teachings Jesus promised, "I am with you always, even to the end of the age." They took this to heart and discovered its truth in the way they approached life and taught others. When you are with Christ, and Christ is with you, you will learn from him and the flavor of his life will season yours. I well remember the sense Teresa and I gained from being in a conference with Dallas Willard, whose life was deeply rooted in Christ. On the way home we remarked that this is what the disciples must

have felt when they were with Jesus—the winsomeness of Dallas’ demeanor, his humility, his joy, his grasp of union with God—it was Jesus alive in him that captured us. When Christ is with you, you will bring refreshment, renewal, a sense of peace, and the display of a non-anxious presence regardless of circumstances around you. Remember Christ’s presence.

The second piece of the ordered life: like Christ, is both a promise and an opportunity. It is a promise in the sense that this is God’s plan for Christ followers so we know that the Spirit is constantly forming this in us. But it is also an opportunity in terms of how we participate in that process. As we adopt this aspect, understand that this is about gaining his perspective more than acquiring his lifestyle. Early in my faith, and even in ministry training, the drumbeat was “Be like Christ.” Who could argue with that? But what did that even mean? No-one ever explained how that could happen. We were given bracelets with WWJD imprinted: What would Jesus do? It was frustrating to think about how to transport a lifestyle molded in 1st century Palestine to the streets of SoCal. Eventually my friends and I assumed it meant being kind, patient, helpful, forgiving, meek—we spent a lot of time trying to figure that out. The trouble was that none of these dynamics were our first impulses—we had to fight off our initial responses and struggle over WWJD? Liberation arrived when it became clear that the idea was to adopt his focus for life, to follow his practices in terms of prayer, solitude, and his attentiveness to the move of the Spirit. You see, Jesus was able to do what he did in the moment because of the time he had spent in preparation for it. My early confusion developed by attending to the moment, rather than the preparation. Here then, is where our effort kicks in. Jesus was clearly steeped in Scripture—he knew the history of God’s interaction with Israel and the world in general. This informed his understanding of God’s purpose for life and where history was headed. Jesus was a person of prayer. Though we get but a glimpse of his life through the gospels, there’s enough in there to reveal his persistent practice of prayer—not just grace before meals, but in-depth, often long prayer to God in solitude. His own testimony to this came when he stood at the tomb of Lazarus where he prayed aloud, “Father, I thank you that you have heard me. I know that you always hear me, but I said this for the benefit of the people standing here...” Prayer is where we take our understanding of God informed by Scripture, and ask that it be worked in our life to accomplish what God desires in the moments we encounter. These practices woven into our life prepare us for the moments ahead—even when we don’t know exactly what they are. Opportunity is the outcome of preparation. As we grasp the sense of God’s character and desire, and pray for these to be alive in us, when the opportunity presents, we will easily and naturally respond to the moment in ways that correspond with God’s purpose. This is cultivated preparation—it is something we do, it requires effort, it takes some time. It isn’t difficult, but it does involve planning, intent, and persistence. Learn from me, Jesus said, and as we do, we slip into the easy yoke.

You’ll recall that the last phrase in the ordered life is: from Christ. Formerly this had been “for” Christ, which represented our efforts to promote the kingdom. And while it is certainly true that our acts of service contribute to that end, this can lead us astray in a couple of ways—one is where the focus becomes what we’re doing, so an accomplishment mentality takes hold in us that can turn into a wrong-headed, merit based faith: have we done enough to merit God’s favor? The other can be paralyzing where we think, I can’t possibly do anything of merit for the kingdom, I haven’t got it in me. Neither of these is the easy yoke, because the focus is on what we bring to the task. We slip into the easy yoke when we focus on grace rather than accomplishment, meaning that whatever we do, we do from the abundance of grace that is ours through Jesus. Remember that grace is the power of God to do what you cannot do in your strength alone. And there is no shortage of grace where God is concerned. It seems human nature to operate from a scarcity mentality—we assess our capabilities and resources and assume these to be fixed and non-renewable. In that same vein, we may assume that what we have is insufficient as it is—we better hang onto what little we have in the hopes that maybe one day we’ll have what it takes. But if God’s history tells us anything, it tells us that God is a master at using what’s available to us in the moment. When God called Moses to lead the children of Israel out of Egypt’s bondage, and Moses demurred, God asked, “What is that in your hand?” “A staff,” Moses replied. The Lord said, “Throw it on the ground.”

When he did, it became a snake, and Moses ran from it. But then God told him to pick it up by the tail. When he did so, it became a staff once more. An ordinary staff can become compelling evidence of God's power unleashed. When Jesus told his disciples to feed the multitude of thousands who had gathered without provision to hear him teach, they found one lunch given to that end. Jesus said, "Bring it to me." Looking up to heaven, he gave thanks and broke the loaves, and a simple lunch multiplied to feed thousands. That's grace. It's God's specialty. These accounts are there to point us to God's abundant provision, God's energy, God's power from which we derive the ability to act in ways that reveal the kingdom. You see, our actions empowered by grace reveal the kingdom which is always among us already. When God's Spirit moves us to act, we respond from the bounty of grace that supplies what we need—and it may certainly begin with using what we have at hand, but it endures by God's power and provision. When we rely on grace, we slip into the easy yoke and find sufficiency for whatever is necessary.

With Christ, like Christ, and from Christ is an elegant solution to the disorder jangling about us—the simplicity of an ordered life will carry us through all of life's contingencies, if we'll pursue it. AMEN