



INDEPENDENT

By Rev. Will Nelken

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Places may change, and faces may change, but human nature remains the same.

I recall how Jacob, the promised son of Isaac and grandson of Abraham, deceived his father in order to obtain his favored blessing before he died.

Among the words which he longed to hear were these: *“May peoples serve you and nations bow down to you. You will be lord over your brothers, and the sons of your mother will bow down to you. May those who curse you be cursed, and those who bless you be blessed.”* (Genesis 27:27)

Many people still long for such a legacy, but the apostles of our Lord Jesus, who were the seed of Jacob’s deception, were led up an alternate path.

They said, *“When we are cursed, we bless.”*

Scum and Garbage

Scum and garbage. That’s how the Apostle Paul described the treatment he and his coworkers had received, even from their own countrymen.

“To this moment, we are hungry, thirsty, poorly dressed, roughly treated, and homeless. We wear ourselves out doing physical labor. We have become the scum of the earth, the garbage of the world.” (1 Corinthians 4:11-13)

We Bless

But, look at their response. *“When people verbally abuse us, we bless them. When people persecute us, we endure it. When our reputations are attacked, we remain courteous.”* (1 Corinthians 4:12-13)

Their response sets a high bar. How can anyone attain to so high a level of selflessness and love?

Trouble Comes

Life is not easy. It quickly fills up with disobedience, isolation, distrust, vengeance, and hostility. This is true of the world in which we live, even in this “land of the free and home of the brave.”

Just recall the last two years... And before you start pointing fingers and naming names, take a good look at yourself...

Back then we griped (COVID restrictions); right now we gloat (SCOTUS decisions).

Both are total distractions. Can you hear Jesus griping like that? “Who do they think they are? Trying to tell us how and where we can worship!”

Or, can you imagine Jesus boasting: “Finally, we’re recovering some ground! Putting God back where He belongs.”

Son of the Father

Why can’t we find reactions or expressions like that from Jesus in the Bible? Because He was never less than the thoroughly loved Son of the Father. God was always before Him, even though the world was askew and faithless and evil.

And because, to Him, every person was just that—a person; not an object, or a project, or a hindrance, or an interruption—a unique expression of God’s creative genius, His image in human form (however marred or distorted that image may have become).

Not everyone will let you get to know them that way—as a person—but they’re worth knowing, just the same.

We tend to know people (and define people) according to their behavior.

If they’re nice to me, I like them.

If they have a good sense of humor, I like them.

If they’re crabby, I don’t like them.

If they’re vulgar, I don’t like them.

If they’re polite, I like them.

If they talk smack about others, I don’t like them.

If they’re good to me, they’re good people; if they’re mean to me, they’re bad people.

And it's actually important to be aware of the common behaviors of people, in order to associate with those who build you up and avoid those who tear you down (whenever you have a choice). But God doesn't always give us a choice.

You Don't Get to Choose

You don't get to choose your family members. You don't get to choose your classmates. You don't get to choose your officemates. You don't get to choose your neighbors.

And Jesus commanded us to love our neighbors. It wasn't a suggestion.

But how is it possible? How can we actually live that way? It's easier to talk about than to do. It's easier to tell others what they need to do to be loving, than to do it ourselves. Is it *just* talk?

In some of his letters, Paul ascribed this behavioral possibility to living *in Christ*.

Romans 6:11 So you too consider yourselves dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus.

Romans 8:1 There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

2 Corinthians 5:17 So then, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; what is old has passed away—look, what is new has come!

It's only in Christ that a genuine godly response to human evil is possible.

Independence or In Dependence?

As Americans, we pride ourselves on our independent republic, a democracy that promotes life, liberty, and happiness, as universal opportunities for its citizens. We celebrate this again today and tomorrow! And I do celebrate it!!

But this independence from tyranny and oppression is reliant on a certain DEPENDENCE for its moral equity.

Our first president, George Washington, declared in his final address: "Of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, religion and morality are indispensable supports. And let us with caution indulge the supposition that morality can be maintained without religion."

His vice-president and successor, John Adams, concurred: "We have no government armed with power capable of contending with human passions unbridled by morality and religion. Our Constitution was made only for a moral and religious people. It is wholly inadequate to the government of any other."

The independence for which so many thousands have fought and died, and which we celebrate again today, is not unbridled license to do whatever we please, with or to whomever we want. It is independence bound by moral respect and reverent dependence on God.

When these are subverted or discarded, chaos, aggression, and destruction follow.

Paul expressed such reverent dependence as living *"in Christ."*

Let me be clear, our fellow Americans need not be blood-bought, Spirit-filled Christians in order to behave with moral respect and reverence. One does not need to be Christian to be American. Nor does one need to be an American to be a Christian.

They are two different worlds that intersect and co-exist, but they are not identical. Be sure that you do not confuse them, because one will last forever, while the other is bound to crumble. The American Constitution is not the Holy Bible, and the Bible is not the Constitution of the United States of America.

In Him

So what did Paul mean... *in Christ*? Let me offer three insights:

"In" is a word that locates us. In Christ is a place to reside. In His hand. In His arms. In His care. In His presence. You've never been loved like Jesus loves you. He redefines the word for us. Make time to spend time with Him. It will never be wasted.

"In" marks our boundaries. We are inside and not outside; within and not without. Embraced by His Father. Led by His Spirit. Sustained by His power. Informed by His Word. Surrounded by His grace. You've never been led like Jesus leads you. He is the original servant-leader. Follow Him, don't ignore what He has told you, don't try to find your own way.

"In" describes a relationship—living in dependence on Jesus. Listening to Him attentively. Waiting for Him, not rushing ahead. Pleasing Him by obeying Him.

No one has ever provided for you as thoughtfully as Jesus. His thoughts about you are beyond numbering. He knows everything about you—even your secret sins—and He loves you passionately. When you lack wisdom, He will guide you. When you lack material goods, He'll provide for you.

Are you there today? Are you aware of His loving presence? Do you rest in Christ's care?

Are you “in Him” today? Do you stay in His lane? Follow His instructions? Does He command your behavior?

Do you consider yourself “in a relationship” with Jesus Christ? Is it a dependent relationship, or are you in charge? Do you make the time to cultivate that relationship?

Can we say, with Paul and the early disciples, “*When people verbally abuse us, we bless them. When people persecute us, we endure it. When our reputations are attacked, we remain courteous.*”?

Only if we make it our daily priority to be *in Christ*, to walk *in Christ*, and to talk *in Christ*. Let’s commit to make that our everyday reality.