



CHAPTER 8

THE FORGOTTEN TREE

Virtually every sermon preached today is built on the assumption that you can eventually be a successful Christian if you just try hard enough. “Try harder to be like Christ.” “Work at it, and you’ll be like Him.” “Study your Bible, obey it, and you’ll be like Jesus.” “Get serious, take Jesus as your model, and you’ll be a good disciple.” “You become like what you admire. Admire Christ more and you’ll be more like Him.” So we are told. It’s also not uncommon to hear Christian groups and churches say, “We’re just trying to be like Jesus.” The message is: “Imitate Jesus, and you’ll be just like Him.”

But as we saw in a previous chapter, this isn’t the gospel. Neither can you find such a thought in the New Testament.

Most of the exhortations in sermons and books to “follow Jesus” and “imitate Jesus” are built on a profound flaw. That flaw is this: All you have to do is stick your nose in the Gospels, find

out what Jesus did, and then, voilà. Do it yourself. You will then be a good Christian.

Let's consider what people find when they put their noses in the New Testament. Christians from some traditions only nose out healing the sick, casting out devils, and performing miracles, so they try to do those things. Christians from other traditions only sniff out feeding the poor, standing with the oppressed, and loving sinners, so those are the things they try to do. Christians from still other traditions focus on living holy lives and keeping their noses clean, so they wrinkle up their noses at the world, the flesh, and the devil.

But few smell the fragrance of the whole of Jesus' life and ministry.

As we have already argued, every person who has set out to try to be like Jesus has come to one inescapable conclusion (the ones who are honest, at least): trying to be like Jesus is an impossible

<p>No man knows how bad he is, 'til he has tried very hard to be good. —C. S Lewis¹</p>	<p>undertaking. You will fail at it again and again. The reason, however, is rarely discussed.</p> <p>It's because we look at the <i>fruit</i> of what Jesus did but ignore the <i>root</i> behind His actions. We are like those who dissect an orange and try to duplicate it in a laboratory, without ever asking the basic questions: "What produced this orange? How did it happen exactly?"</p>
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THE SOURCE OF JESUS' LIFE

First off, Jesus said something that every disciple should grasp and never forget. It's startling when you first read it. Nonetheless, it's

a basic truth we must understand if we are to make any real progress in the Lord: *Jesus Christ could not be a “successful” Christian, and He admitted it.*

Consider His own words:

Most assuredly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of Himself . . .²

I can of Myself do nothing.³

Now behold, one came and said to Him, “Good Teacher, what good thing shall I do that I may have eternal life?” So He said to him, “Why do you call Me good? No one is good but One, that is, God.”⁴

Jesus Christ, your Lord, stated very clearly that He could do nothing in His own energy. What is more, He said that only His Father was good.

So how exactly did Jesus live His life while on earth? If He couldn’t do anything on His own, how did He live so flawlessly?

Look at His answer:

Whatever the Father does the Son also does.⁵

I judge only as I hear, and my judgment is just, for I seek not to please myself but him who sent me.⁶

I do nothing on my own but speak just what the Father has taught me.⁷

For I did not speak of my own accord, but the Father who sent me commanded me what to say and how to say it.⁸

Don't you believe that I am in the Father, and that the Father is in me? The words I say to you are not just my own. Rather, it is the Father, living in me, who is doing his work.⁹

Jesus did not live by His own natural strength. Instead, He lived by the energy of His Father who indwelled Him.

He spoke when His Father spoke through Him.

He worked when His Father worked through Him.

He made judgments when His Father judged within Him.

Jesus only did what the Father did, and He did it by means of His Father's indwelling life.

Therein lies the root of Jesus' amazing life. Yet few people talk about it today.

THE TORCH GETS PASSED

We know that Jesus lived by His Father's life. But what about us fallen mortals? What about us Christians?

According to the many sermons we hear preached today, one would think that Jesus gave us a completely different way to live than the way He lived. Jesus said clearly that He couldn't do anything in His own strength. But we are told (or it's heavily implied) that *we* can.

The presupposition that sits underneath virtually every sermon heralded today and most of the Christian books that fill the

bookstores is that we can live the Christian life if we just try hard enough. If we just study our Bible more, pray more, witness more, tithe more, hear more sermons . . . then we can be like Jesus.

But that's not the gospel.

The gospel teaches that just as Jesus couldn't do anything of Himself, we can't do anything of *ourselves*. Listen to the Lord again: "Without *Me* you can do nothing."¹⁰ The "Christian life" is impossible. It's only *Him*-possible. We can try as hard as we wish to be like Christ, but human effort will never touch the hem of that garment. It's like trying to square a circle. It's like paddling into the gale with one oar. It's like building and operating a motel along a highway that never gets built.

The glory of the gospel is that we who are fallen, tarnished, and marred have been invited to live our lives in the exact same way that Jesus lived His life: by an indwelling Lord.

Let's go back to resurrection day. It is evening. Jesus appears to ten fearful men in a sealed room. He penetrates the door and stands before them.

The Lord bids them peace, and then He takes a deep breath. As a resurrected, life-giving Spirit, the Lord Jesus Christ breathes into these men the wind of God's own life.

Behold we show you a mystery: Just as God the Father lived in Jesus, so now God the Son will begin to live in these ten men. The "only begotten" has now become "the firstborn among many brethren," and God is now the Father of these disciples.

Go to My brethren and say to them, "I am ascending to My Father, and your Father, and to My God and your God."¹¹

From this point on, the apostles began to live their lives the same way Jesus Christ lived His—by the power of an indwelling Lord. The passage moved from the Father living out His life in the Son, to the Son living out His life in the disciples.

Point: What the Father was to Jesus Christ, Jesus Christ is to you. *He's your indwelling Lord.* When the veil of the temple was ripped from top to bottom, He got out and we got in.

Jesus cried out again with a loud voice, and yielded up His spirit. Then, behold, the veil of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom; and the earth quaked, and the rocks were split.¹²

Therefore, brethren, having boldness to enter into the Holiest by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way which He consecrated for us, through the veil, that is, His flesh.¹³

But there is more. Because all the fullness of the Godhead was pleased to dwell in Christ, the Father and the Spirit also are pleased to dwell in you. As amazing as it sounds, the entire Trinitarian community has taken up residence inside of you.

You, then, are the victim of a divine conspiracy. You have become the habitat of the living God.

Knowing Christ as your “rest” and allowing Him to live His life through you is one of the most freeing things that you can know as a Christian. “He who has entered His rest has himself also ceased from his works as God did from His.”¹⁴

Resting in Christ doesn't mean being passive. It means allowing the Lord to do the heavy lifting. Laziness is no more the way to follow Jesus than is busyness.

He who calls you is faithful, who also will do it.¹⁵

For it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure.¹⁶

THE CHOICE OF TWO TREES

When the Creator planted the garden of Eden, He put two trees in the center of it. Today, these same trees stand at the center of life.

The meaning of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil can be understood by the serpent's promise: "By eating from this tree, you will be making your *own* decision. You will be like God, determining for *yourself* what is right and what is wrong."

The fall of humanity was all about women and men assuming the posture that they don't need anyone to tell them what to do. They would decide for themselves what's good and what's bad. They would be self-sufficient and self-determining.

Of course, what was ignored in that whole discussion is the tree of life.

God wanted humans to eat from the tree of life. Eating from the tree of life meant receiving the uncreated life of God into oneself. The tree of life was God's own life made accessible to human beings.

Today, the tree of life is the Lord Jesus Christ.

I am the true vine. . . . As the living Father sent Me, and I live because of the Father, so he who feeds on Me will live because of Me.¹⁷

As we have already seen, when we receive Christ, we receive the life of God. Divine life becomes ours. Receiving Christ is simply taking the first bite from the right tree.

Living by God's life is very different from living by the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. A person who is living by the tree of life doesn't sit back and say, "Let me try to do good and avoid evil." Instead, he allows the life of God to flow within and through him. He *yields* to the instincts, promptings, and energy of that God-life.

You see, "good" is a form of life. And only God is good.

Here are the two choices before you today:

1. The choice to intellectually *know* good from evil and to *try* to do good = the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.
2. Living by the life of God, which is goodness itself = the tree of life.

Mark it down: the knowledge of good is the accepted counterfeit to living by life.

The Christian religion¹⁸ is built on the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. The Christian religion can be studied using the same categories of thought used to study any other world religion. It can be analyzed just as Islam, Judaism, and Buddhism are analyzed. The difficulty with the Christian religion (like all religions) is that it makes its adherents think that they have now found the real knowledge of good and evil.

Religion gives people the notion that they have God under control. Religion says that we can understand God absolutely and

completely. We can predict what the Almighty will do tomorrow. The Christian religion teaches that the Bible answers virtually every question that's brought to the sacred text. The problem with this line of thought is that the true God cannot fit into anyone's box. God will always end up breaking out of our human expectations and understanding. Every attempt to capture God and cram and ram Him in a system will ultimately fail.

The true God is an untamed lion. He cannot be controlled. The true God *is* the controller.

Yet many Christians have turned the Bible into a form of the knowledge of good and evil. They approach the Bible as raw material by which they can gain control over their lives, so life can be more understandable and under control, less unnerving and unpredictable.

Oh that we discerning
Its most holy learning,
Lord, may love and
fear Thee, Evermore
be near Thee!

—Henry Baker's hymn about
the Bible¹⁹

This is a profoundly grievous misuse of the Bible.

Jesus didn't misuse the Scriptures to gain control and predictability in His own life. To Him, the Scriptures were simply the joystick on the Father's controller. They were the instrument through which He got to know His Father better and to discover how to live out His mission.

JESUS AND THE PHARISEES

The Pharisees were the self-appointed guardians of the Judaic religion. They were highly concerned about the moral state of Israel. The Pharisees looked around and said, "There are lots of people

in this country who have degenerate moral values. In order for us to put a stop to it, we'll have nothing to do with such people. We will not eat at table with them. We will not talk to them. We will ostracize them completely. In this way, we will faithfully uphold the highest possible moral values.”

This outlook spilled over to the Jewish chief priests of the first century. The priests even possessed a private bridge linking their homes to the temple so they wouldn't have to mingle with the common people.

The Pharisees' attempt to promote high moral values was based on the knowledge of good and evil. For this reason, the Lord Jesus—who had a bad reputation of being a “friend of sinners”²⁰—constantly collided with the leaven-dispensing Pharisees.

Jesus pushed the boundaries of religion to their limits. He was also a fierce critic of the priestly temple system of His day, decrying its wrongs.

If you examine Jesus' exchanges with the Pharisees, you'll discover a common thread. The Pharisees would ask a question on one level, and Jesus would answer it on a completely different level. The contrast was sometimes so stark that it would appear that Jesus was answering a different question.

Why is this? It's because the Pharisees' questions were coming from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. And Jesus' response was coming from the tree of life—the life of God.

Jesus went to the people who were shunned by the temple priests: the lame, the blind, the infirm, the lepers, the prostitutes, and even the tax collectors—all of whom were notorious outcasts of society. (The common view of that day was that if you were sick, you deserved it.) Jesus quickly became the champion of the

poor, the ostracized, the oppressed and dispossessed. He ministered to those who were marginalized by society, those regarded as valueless.²¹

By doing so, the Lord upstaged the temple system, shaking all of its cages. He rattled the Pharisees by overturning their social customs, norms, and structures. He outraged the priests by claiming to speak for God. He broke down many of the barriers that separated people. And in the process, He was put to death by their collapse.

Regrettably, there is a great deal of pharisaism in the Christian family today.

The Bible teaches the highest possible moral values. But the Bible is fundamentally not about morality. Following the Lord Jesus Christ involves living out the highest moral values. But following Jesus is fundamentally not about morality. Conversion to Christ involves a moral transformation of life. But conversion is not fundamentally about morality either. The most moral unsaved person on the planet needs Christ just as much as the most immoral one. It is Christ, not religion, that saves us.

Christianity, therefore, is not fundamentally about morality. And it has nothing to do with the tree of knowledge of good and evil.

When we attempt to turn our spirituality into a matter of

Miss Maudie stopped rocking, and her voice hardened. "You are too young to understand it," she said, "but sometimes the Bible in the hand of one man is worse than a whiskey bottle in the hand of [another]."

—Harper Lee, *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960)²²

morality, we have begun to eat from the wrong tree. The result is the same as what we see with the Pharisees.

AN EXAMPLE OF MODERN PHARISAISM

Case in point: During the 1980s, many Christians retreated to the suburbs and created for themselves a ring of safe suburban churches. Occasionally they would toss out small patches of money to support tiny inner-city missions, but they stayed away from all the people with whom they disapproved. In fact, many of them became preoccupied with promoting movements that were centered around condemning the bad behavior they observed in the culture around them.

These Christians were not mistaken in condemning immoral behavior. But they were profoundly mistaken in their approach to those who were practicing immorality. They were wrong to think that the proper reaction should be to run as fast as they can in the opposite direction lest they become morally polluted.

That is pharisaism, plain and simple. And it's the exact mind-set that your Lord opposed and taught against. Yet this mind-set took over a large segment of the Christian population in the 1980s, and it's still with us today.

There's a fundamental flaw in the agenda that says that Christians must deal with the world by keeping it at arm's length. This agenda fleshes itself out when believers toss condemnations against the world from a distance. It fleshes itself out in the unholy sentiment that leads us to picking up the nearest doctrinal and moral ball bat and hitting the world over the head with it as hard as possible—and feeling justified with such brutality.

Living by the tree of life is the antidote for this.

Those who live by the life of Christ do not act as though they are morally superior to others. While they stand separate from the defilements of sin and the world, they embrace those who are wounded, hurt, confused, and defiled by them. So on the one hand, believers are “set apart from sinners,” but on the other hand, they are the *friends* of sinners.

Such a high priest meets our need—one who is holy, blameless, pure, set apart from sinners. . . . The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, “Look, a glutton and a winebibber, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!” But wisdom is justified by her [actions].²³

It was Christ’s compassion for the brokenhearted and rejected that drew women and men to Him. And He is the same today as He was then.

Herein lies the missing keynote in the church’s approach to the world. If our faith is based on partaking of the wrong tree, we will act like modern Pharisees. If we partake of the tree of life, we will be empowered to go into a godless world as servants of its unacknowledged Lord.

It is critical for us, then, to learn that the life of Christ is within us. And by following that life and yielding to it, we can display the same Jesus who shook the world, conquered sin and death, set the captives free, and lives forevermore.

Right now, countless nonbelievers view Christians as hypocritical, judgmental, irrelevant, boring, and self-righteous. This is because so many Christians have never learned what it means to

eat from the tree of life. Instead, they have been given a steady diet of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

To be perfectly candid, there are few things that are as dull and boring in life as Christianity without the living, breathing, radiant, triumphant Christ. It's a first-degree snoozer. If you could bottle it, you would have the cure for insomnia.

But there is nothing in life that is more fascinating than Christ. He is the most exciting person in the universe, bar none. But we are speaking about the real Christ, not the shallow, anemic, insipid "Jesus" that's so often promoted today.

Consequently, when God's people begin living by an indwelling Lord, the world begins to get a glimpse of the real Jesus. The result? All of their negative experiences about religion,

We cannot live the Christian life on our own or by our own strength, and Jesus says, "I never said you could. I always said I would."

—Dr. Terrence Kelshaw,
bishop, diocese of the Rio Grande²⁴

Christianity, and moral condemnation are overcome by the steady, regular, persistent, and stubborn extension of God's imponderable love in Christ for them.

When you enter into a dark place, it's better to light a candle than curse the darkness.

So this is the Lord's challenge for our day: to move beyond the religious knowledge of good and evil and into a full *yieldedness* to the

life of Christ that beats within every child of God. Human energy in the work of God won't cut it. It's one thing to work *for* God. It is another to work *with* God. And it's yet another to have God work *through* you. The work of God is God Himself at work.

But the latter only happens when we are living by the tree of life and Christ becomes the motivation *and* the source of our service. In this way, we discover what it means to serve in the Lord's energy rather than our own.

A PEOPLE OF THE PERSON

Sometimes Christians are described as “a people of the book,” meaning the Bible. But to be true to the book means being occupied with the person—Jesus Christ. We have a high view of Scripture because we have a high view of Christ, and the two can never be separated.

On the last day of His earthly life, Jesus stood before a Roman provincial governor, Pontius Pilate, and was questioned. “I came into the world to testify to the truth,” Jesus said.

Pilate asked Him, “What is truth?”

Jesus didn't answer the question because Pilate was staring at truth and didn't recognize it. Truth is not a book, or a denomination, or a creed, or a liturgy. Truth is a person. And Jesus is His name.

Christianity, therefore, is not fundamentally about following a book. It's about following a person and living out of His life. The library of divinely inspired books we call the Holy Bible best helps us to follow that person, for they testify of Him.

The Bible does not offer a plan or a blueprint for living. The “good news” was not a new list of laws, or an improved set of ethical injunctions, or an amended plan with the latest addenda and corrigenda. The good news was the story of a person's life, as reflected in the Apostles' Creed, where the mystery of faith

proclaims this narrative: “Christ has died, Christ has risen, Christ will come again.”

The written Word is a map that leads us to the living Word. Or as Jesus Himself put it, “The Scriptures point to Me!”²⁵ Every part of the sacred text breathes the same oxygen—Christ. So the Bible is not the destination; it’s a compass that points to Jesus—heaven’s Lodestar.

LOST FOR WORDS

It is all too possible to confuse an academic knowledge or theology about Jesus with a personal knowledge of the living Christ Himself. These two stand as far apart as do the hundred thousand million galaxies.

The Christian faith claims to be rational, but also to reach out to touch ultimate mysteries. So the fullness of Christ can never be

Beware you be not
swallowed up in
books: an ounce of
love is worth a pound
of knowledge.

—John Wesley²⁶

accessed through the frontal lobe alone. That’s why Jesus did not leave His disciples with CliffsNotes for a systematic theology. He left them with breath and body. He didn’t leave them with a coherent and clear belief system by which to love God and others. He gave them wounds to touch and hands to heal. He didn’t leave them with intellectual belief or a “Christian worldview.” He left them with a relational faith and an indwelling presence.

The Bible does not hit just one note for sixty-six books. It speaks anew to every age. It should be read in the light of new

information and fresh discoveries. It must also be understood in community, not as an individual. Both Testaments were written to communities and can only be rightly understood within that same context.²⁷

And as one would expect of a Trinitarian faith, participation is required because the reader plays an important role in discovering what the Bible teaches based on the diversities of what we bring to it.

The Bible is not reader-indifferent or history-independent. Each age draws new insights from the Scriptures based on what that age brings to it. This means that revelation is always veiled in mystery. We bring to it our culture, our history, our gaze, and our glasses. The fundamentalist idea that the text has only one meaning is of relatively recent invention (it was spawned from Enlightenment rationalism).²⁸

But regardless of your interpretation of Scripture, unless the cutting edge of your life and ministry is Jesus Christ, you're building castles in the sand and skating on invisible ice. That's why, once and for all, the church must be awakened to the Christ who lives within her and begin to understand the limitless resources of His indwelling life.

Or to put it another way, we must begin living by the forgotten tree rather than the forbidden one.²⁹