

The Position of the Christian Life – 1 – Why Position Matters

A little while ago, the press reported on a couple who had been arriving uninvited at very high-level political parties, one of which was held at the White House. This couple acted in a way that made people think they were part of the invited guests, but in fact they were impostors. Eventually they were caught, and found themselves under investigation. You don't just walk into a presidential dinner uninvited.

If that's true of the president of the most powerful nation on earth, is it not true of the Creator of the Universe? Can human beings simply walk into His presence uninvited, as they are, and remain there as long as they please? Some people would like you to believe that. They tell you to look at the big blue sky, the warm sunlight, the free air we breathe, and to conclude that knowing God is as free and easy and accessible as breathing the air around us.

However, the Bible does not teach this. As much as the Bible also praises God's common grace in giving rain to all people everywhere; as much as it says that the very heavens declare the glory of God; as much as it emphasizes that He is not far from each of us, it also says things which balance that thought. It says:

Isaiah 59:2 ² *But your iniquities have separated you from your God; And your sins have hidden His face from you, So that He will not hear.*

Psalm 34:16 *The face of the LORD is against those who do evil, To cut off the remembrance of them from the earth.*

NKJ **Psalm 5:5** *The boastful shall not stand in Your sight; You hate all workers of iniquity.*

Anyone who understands the gospel knows that this is the central issue. Man cannot stand again in God's presence unless the sin of man is dealt with. As much as God showers the whole world with gifts, these gifts only serve to further indict hard hearts that respond without gratitude and submission. God's common grace, seen in creation, is not a sign that all people are reconciled to Him and can stand in His presence.

We need atonement. We need to have our sins forgiven, and to be given positive merit in the form of Christ's imputed righteousness. This is the gospel we preach to unbelievers, but amazingly, we Christians who have embraced it, are prone to forget it. We are prone to view it as the key that unlocked the door of salvation, and little else. We fail to see how the gospel is crucial to Christian discipleship. Paul did not merely say that the gospel was the means of salvation. Listen to what he says in 1 Corinthians 15:1

NKJ **1 Corinthians 15:1** *Moreover, brethren, I declare to you the gospel which I preached to you, which also you received and in which you stand,*

We stand in the gospel. It is our position, our place, and it is the reason we are able to keep living in God's presence. We are not gate-crashers when it comes to God's presence. Paul puts it this way in

Romans 5:2: *through whom also we have access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God.*

The gospel, this grace, gives us access to God. It is Christ's position and provision. The position of the Christian life is the place from which a Christian lives the rest of his Christian life. The position of the Christian life is the foundation on which he builds; the material with which he builds and the pattern he uses to build. The gospel is not something we are to forget about once we are saved; it is to be something we keep in front of us all our days. As Paul put it in Colossians 2:6:

Colossians 2:6 ⁶ *As you have therefore received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in Him,*

In other words, live the Christian life the way you received it. Contained in the gospel are the truths crucial for successful Christian living.

Let's back up for a moment to understand where we are in this series. We began by considering the priority of the Christian life, which is to love God ultimately. When we do that, we glorify God, and experience fulfilment ourselves as we reflect His beauty. We then considered the process of the Christian life – how we come to love God in this way. We saw it is a process of coming to know Him progressively as a Person. When we know Him by being in His presence, we come to know His mind, His heart, and as we do, we are changed to be more like Him ourselves. This increasingly conformity to His nature leads us to love Him wholeheartedly. And we considered how living life in God's presence is a process of communion, conviction, confession, cleansing and conformity to Christ. But we have taken something for granted in considering the process of the Christian life. We have assumed that a Christian has the right to commune with God; we have assumed that a Christian does not lose his salvation every time he sins; we have assumed that He is able to live in regular, ongoing fellowship with God, even though his life is still filled with all kinds of sin.

This is assuming too much. No Christian can successfully live in God's presence unless he understands the truths of the position of the Christian life. Unless he is continually reminded of what this grace is in which he stands, unless he continually meditates on the access he has through the finished work of Christ, he will lapse into discouragement, defeat and even despair.

Too many Christians only know grace and gospel as the means of entry into the Christian life. They do not think of it as the road they keep walking in the Christian life. This is what we want to consider in this section of our series – the position of the Christian life.

To correctly picture this idea of the position of the Christian life, we can take one of Paul's favourite phrases 'in Christ'. He uses it at least eighty times in his writings, not always in the same way, but very often to speak of a Christian's position. One definition of a Christian would be that a Christian is a person who is *in Christ*.

Consider some implications of this phrase *in Christ*.

1) Being in Christ determines your standing before God

To be in Christ is to be out of some other realms. For example, Paul says of believers:

“Romans 8:8-9 ⁸ *So then, those who are in the flesh cannot please God.* ⁹ *But you are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you. Now if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he is not His.*

A Christian is not 'in the flesh'. That is, a Christian is not positionally in the old life, the life of rebellion and self-rule. Sometimes Christians say things like, “He was really in the flesh when he acted like that.” But strictly speaking, this is not true. A Christian is never 'in the flesh'. By definition, one 'in the flesh' is unsaved. They are positionally rooted in the old life. A Christian can walk *according* to the flesh, as Paul says in Romans 8:5, but this is acting contrary to her position. A Christian is no longer in the flesh - she is in Christ. For that matter, a Christian is not in the world in the sense of being part of the world system of rebellion against God and being identified with it.

Instead, we are now in Christ.

This means God moves you from one location, with all that it means, to another. You are now fully identified with Christ, instead of with the flesh, or the world, or Satan. This is a matter of possession. You now belong to Christ, you are part of Christ.

There is no such thing as a person halfway between two positions. No one is positionally both in Christ and in the flesh. You cannot be half in Christ, or partially justified. If you are truly in Christ, then your standing has been decisively changed.

That leads to the second implication.

2) Being in Christ defines your standing before God

To be in Christ is to be in union with Christ. As we will see in the next few messages, this means that you are placed in Christ, and Christ dwells within you. There is a union, a bond, the kind of organic union that Christ chose to illustrate with vine and branches. Branches are part of the vine, and the life of the vine flows through them.

To be in union with Christ means that the way God sees us is 'in Christ'. All that Christ is, Christ's standing in heaven; Christ's merits are what now clothe the Christian. Though a Christian can in practice act in a way that is displeasing to God, the Christian is fundamentally clothed with the righteousness and merits of Christ. Christ's merits before God now define our merits before God. This means that God's attitude and actions towards His Son now define His attitude and actions toward us.

This is a very hard concept for many Christians to grasp. How can God separate my practice from my position? Once again, the answer is to look back to the gospel. When you first come to God for salvation, this is exactly what you are asking God to do: to regard Christ's position as your position. You, by faith, trust God to regard His Son as your sin-bearer, and regard His righteousness as your own. This is a legal transaction, a change in status and position. You do not, in that moment of conversion become sinless in practice. Rather, your new position begins to change and affect your practice. This is exactly what Christians have to keep before them. My standing before God has been defined by my position in Christ. Up days and down days aside, the way God views me is the way He views his Son. This is what it means to be in Christ.

The third implication of being in Christ is this:

3) Being in Christ decisively settles your standing before God

The whole biblical concept of distinguishing position from practice, standing from state is foundational to Christian security. If you mix the two up, then you are only as secure as your last act of obedience, or for that matter as insecure as your last sin. But to mix the two up is to fall into the same trap as those who add works to salvation. If it is of grace, then it is no more of works, otherwise grace is no longer grace.

This is why we have Scriptures such as Romans 8:38-39:

Romans 8:38-39 ³⁸ *For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come,* ³⁹ *nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be*

able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Paul is clearly trying to eliminate all possible ways that a believer could be removed from his position in Christ. His answer is that nothing at all can change that position. Once the believer has been transferred from one kingdom to another, from one realm to another, he cannot be removed back. He cannot be unforgiven, unjustified and re-condemned. He cannot be re-clothed with the sin Christ bore for him on the cross, and the verdict of not-guilty rescinded and reversed.

This is why Jesus said:

John 10:27-29 ²⁷ *"My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me. ²⁸ "And I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; neither shall anyone snatch them out of My hand. ²⁹ "My Father, who has given them to Me, is greater than all; and no one is able to snatch them out of My Father's hand.*

To be placed in Christ decisively settles your standing before God. Now, as we'll see, while your position and your practice are not to be confused with one another, that does not mean they are unrelated to one another. Your practice ought to reflect your changed position, and if it never does, you have cause to doubt that your position has changed. Your state of life should reflect the fruit of a changed standing, and if it doesn't, perhaps your standing is still that of one in the flesh. But what your practice cannot do is change your position. It reflects your position; it reveals your position, but it cannot alter your position, otherwise your position is not an act of free grace, but something which your works sustain or maintain or contribute towards.

We can understand this by simply thinking about marriage. If the bond of marriage was continually on probation or in doubt, what effect would that have on the stability of that marriage or the confidence of the people in that marriage? If your actions on a given day could end a marriage, what chance would any marriage have - it would be an uncertain journey, to say the least. No one could build a marriage on such shaky ground. But marriage is not like that. Your experience within that marriage may change, but it does not affect the permanence of the marriage bond.

In fact, there used to be a time when the permanence of the covenant, the position that was granted in the sight of God, the law and society was what caused people to simply work matters out in a marriage. There was a sense that the position was permanent and inviolable, which caused them to weather the everyday ups and downs.

In the same way, a Christian is the bride of Christ. We are in a permanent relationship with Him. This is exactly what allows us to live in His presence continually. When we considered the process of the Christian life, we said that we come to know God through a life of living in His presence. The only way that is possible is through the gracious provision of the gospel which settles our position before God.

When you doubt your position (very often because of your own performance) a lack of stability and confidence results - instead of the joy of the Lord being your strength (Neh 8:10), an oppressive sense of fear and guilt dominates. When a son does not know what to expect from his father, he cannot build a stable, growing relationship with him. When someone believes his position is vulnerable – he acts like it. When he thinks he is secure, he acts like it.

To understand your position is to understand how you are to relate to God, what resources He has available to you, and what you can expect when you come to Him. In short, it will shape much of your view of God.

Our position in Christ is a position granted by grace, and believed by faith. There are at least five results of believing what the Bible says about your position in Christ.

1) Believing in our position before Christ removes the focus from our performance onto Christ's perfection.

Christians are not to meditate on how much we deserve for our works, but on how worthy we are counted, being in Christ. While we give attention to our lives and our sanctification, the only thing we can glory in is the cross, in the merits of Christ.

Galatians 6:14 ¹⁴ *But God forbid that I should boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.*

Therefore, Christ continually gets the glory, because even when we think of ourselves in relation to God, we are directed back to thinking of Christ.

2) Believing in our position in Christ enables us to love God without guilt and fear.

1 John 4:16-19 ⁶ *And we have known and believed the love that God has for us. God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God in him.* ¹⁷ *Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness in the day of judgment; because as He is, so are we in this world.* ¹⁸ *There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear, because fear involves torment. But he who fears has not been made perfect in love.* ¹⁹ *We love Him because He first loved us.*

A looming threat of danger, a crushing sense of accusing guilt destroys the ability to serve out of a joyful, loving, grateful heart. No one can enjoy God who worries that God remains his adversary. No one can seek to please God who is still trying to appease God. No one can love God ultimately unless he knows he is out of debt with God and no longer under condemnation.

Romans 8:1 *Romans 8:1 There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus, who do not walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit.*

We know we can come to God, have direct access to Him, and can grow in love for Him.

Hebrews 4:15 - 5:1 ¹⁵ *For we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin.* ¹⁶ *Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need.*

3) Believing in our position in Christ spurs us on to greater Christlikeness.

Much of the secret of the Christian life is to 'become what you are'. You are to flesh out what is already true of you. You are to practice your position. The Christian life is not trying to send up merit into heaven so that I may eventually have the right to stand there; the Christian life believes that you are already seated in the heavenly places in Christ, and seeking to work that position down into life here on earth. However, you can only do this to the degree that you understand and believe your position in Christ. Romans chapter 6 is the best example of the Bible's logic that we must 'become what we are'.

Romans 6:5-6 ⁵ *For if we have been united together in the likeness of His death, certainly we also shall be in the likeness of His resurrection,* ⁶ *knowing this, that our old man was crucified with Him, that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves of sin.*

Romans 6:11-13 ¹¹ Likewise you also, reckon yourselves to be dead indeed to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus our Lord. ¹² Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body, that you should obey it in its lusts. ¹³ And do not present your members as instruments of unrighteousness to sin, but present yourselves to God as being alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness to God.

After the American Civil War, many of the slaves in America continued to live as slaves even though the Emancipation Proclamation had been issued by Abraham Lincoln. Their new position unfortunately did not change their practice. Christian should not allow unbelief to rob them of the experience of practising a God-given position.

4) Believing in our position in Christ gives us boldness to serve Him and make Him known to the world.

To be aware of your sin and still call others to repentance produces tension within us. How can sinners announce the merits of a holy God? If a sinner tries to announce the merits of a holy God on his own merits, he will either fail dismally, or become a sophisticated hypocrite. If we stand on our own righteousness, we will correctly feel completely unfit to serve God. Our boldness will wither, and we will retreat. When we recall that God has called us and equipped us, we feel ready and authorised to serve Him.

2 Corinthians 3:5 ⁵ Not that we are sufficient of ourselves to think of anything as being from ourselves, but our sufficiency is from God,

5) Believing in our position in Christ fends off Satan's attacks and lies.

Satan is the accuser. That means he accuses us before God and accuses us to our faces – decrying how unworthy we are. Satan's goal is to see us retreat into a defensive posture, where we try to make excuses, or try to boast in our own righteousness. The more we do so, the less we are looking to and trusting Christ, and the more advantage we have given Satan to exploit our pride, our fears and our guilt. When Satan accuses us, we must face him with our position in Christ, not with our own righteousness or with feeble excuses. This is one of the primary ways that we resist him; we remind him and ourselves of our position 'in Christ'

James 4:7 ⁷ Therefore submit to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you.

These five reasons are among the most important for explaining why a Christian needs to know and believe in his graciously given position in Christ. Every Christian needs to know what the gospel has accomplished, the gospel in which he still stands, the grace by which he still has access to God.

This God-given position is exactly why the Christian can live in God's presence and commune with God, confess his sin and grow closer to being like Christ. God has made it possible by accepting the believer, securing the believer and completing the believer in Christ. Next week, we will consider some of what the New Testament says about being in Christ.