

Most people have an idea of what a Christian is like, or rather, what a Christian should be like. It may be more correct to put the emphasis on the word, “should.” Synonymously we can use the word, “ought.” When we think of the following words we will each have a picture in our mind that has either been experienced or a preconceived image attached to it: a policeman; soldier; the Queen; an important person; Winston Churchill; Shakespeare; a nurse; a fireman; a minister. Too often we allow ourselves to have strong images about Christians and Christianity. The image Paul gives in his letter to the Philippians is the ultimate hope and goal that he is able to express and surely it is a goal that we too must acknowledge. But sometimes we can read a passage of Scripture such as this and then we look at the world around us, our sisters and our brothers and sometimes we look at our expectation of how life should be treating us as we enlarge the umbrella image to cover ourselves.

It is unrealistic to believe that everyone is going to agree with us all the time, like us all the time, or love us all the time, just because we call ourselves Christians. We are grateful for those who do. We do not need to be defeated by those who do not.

When a person becomes a Christian or enters into a Christian community, they still keep their own distinct way of likes and dislikes, cares, fears, jubilancy and so on. All these things make us individuals. It is unrealistic to believe we can be successful in every venture or that we can be perfect in all we attempt to do, nor has anyone ever been and no one ever will. It is good to strive for improvement. We should strive for our best. But that is all that we can do and I believe that is what Paul is expressing in this passage, the best that the people can do at Philippi in working toward the goal of being more like Christ; *“I pray that your love will keep on growing, more and more ... so that you will be able to choose what is best. ... then you will be free on the Day of Christ.”* (v 9,10), or another translation, *“... you will be free on the Day of Judgement.”* I believe that Paul is teaching one of the very basic lessons of all learning and it applies equally to the growth of a Christian. Christian living is not something that you buy at a store or put a looney or a tooney in a machine, turn the knob, and then Zap! Zap! you have got it instantly once and for all. It is not something that is measured with a scientific instrument as to size, weight and temperature. Paul’s message I think can be paraphrased in a few words: *“Keep on growing, prepare for the day when Christ will call you, and if you do this, your lives will be filled with the truly good qualities upon which Jesus Christ can produce, and this is for the glory and praise of God.”* Paul is trying in this and other passages to teach us how to live now so as to prepare for the life which is to come. No where in any of his writings does he suggest that we can attain or know the Utopia of Utopia’s in this life. So many people read this passage, and I am aware of the language difficulties, but I am amazed how many will read this and suggest that because one becomes a Christian today that they will have arrived! Perhaps what it is, is a language problem more with English than in the Greek. We do not nor will not ever become the twin of Jesus Christ but rather as Christians we are on a purposeful journey or experience in that we are always in the process of “becoming” Christ-like. It is a great feeling to do well but we are not expected to be perfect. If a task or a project or something in life goes wrong it does not mean we as persons are unworthy. Is this not what it means to live by grace, that even after our baptism into Christ it is grace that sets us free of our human weaknesses and human way of erring and failing?

It is unrealistic to believe that there is any job or task that does not have its frustrations, its discouragements and its disappointments. Some more than others and some less. But they are always there. If 50% of our tasks are enjoyable, that is 50% positive and that is in my mind, good. Appreciate the good parts of every task, accept the discouragement and be grateful for the opportunities to have another chance or another experience.

It is unrealistic to believe that there is any relationship at home, work or play that does not

have some tension, some stress or some differences. As long as we deal with people or even as long as we live with ourselves critically and truthfully we will deal with some challenge or problem. They are not always going to act the way we want them to. We do not always prefer the way we feel we ought to. It is the same as a sports person, the golfer or the basketball player who just missed the shot after feeling so good and so sure that there was no way they could miss having been mentally and physically prepared.

We are to make an honest effort to see the good in people and situations as well as the frustrations. It is unrealistic to believe that there is any place, city, church or neighbourhood that is completely free from problems or challenges or that there is any place or situation that does not have room for change or improvement. There is no such thing as Utopia. It is also true that there is almost no place that does not have some advantages and some good points. Learn to see them and be grateful for them.

It is unrealistic to believe that we will ever be completely free from feelings of guilt, doubt, inadequacy, anxiety or anger. They are part of being human. They need to be understood and controlled but they are always present. Accept your own fallibility and your own humanity. Be as gracious and understanding with yourself as you would be to others.

It is unrealistic to feel that others should be blamed for all they say and do. Everyone has their own problems and tensions. Most people want to do their best and even better. If we understood their background we might understand their behaviour. We need to try to understand to be kind.

It is unrealistic to avoid life and to refuse to face life realistically and honestly. Life is not always easy,

but it does have meaning. We can face it with dignity and courage; ie failure in an exam, break something accidentally, lose a precious thing like a ring; the death of a loved one.

It is unrealistic to believe that we can achieve anything significant quickly or that we can change in a hurry, ourselves, situations or others. Achievements and change are possible but they usually come slowly and in small steps. The past does not need to control the future. We do have choices that we can make. Recognize the possibility of growth and keep moving in a healthy direction.

It is unrealistic to feel that there is only one solution to any given situation or that things are catastrophic if we do not find our solution. Seek help when needed. The message that Paul gives us is that we must, like the people at Philippi keep trying and always maintain our faith so that we will not be found wanting on the day when Jesus shall call each one of us before His throne, and so when He calls, we can receive the fullness of all the blessings that Christ wants for each one of us. Christ's own words: "*I go to prepare a place for you...*" Paul's teaching is that the place is prepared and we are to prepare ourselves, that we must be realistic for we cannot usher in the kingdom, but we can prepare for it as we grow in our earthly Christian humanity. Amen.