

November is the time of year that reminds me of the beginning of basketball season. When I played the sport in High School, I recall the long weeks of pre-season practice in November. The first game didn't come until the end of the month, and so throughout the preceding weeks, we spent day after day in the gym doing drills and conditioning. Practices consisted of repetition and more repetition--the same drills over and over. Foul shots, jump stops, boxing out, figure eights, defensive stance, bounce passes, chest passes, overhead passes. And of course, running!

Every year it was the same. It didn't matter if you had played on the team the previous year or even the previous 3 years. The coach demanded we all go back to the basics.

We can never overestimate the importance of the basics. That's true if you want to succeed in basketball. It's also a non-negotiable if you want to prosper in the Christian life.

Because of that, we are going to begin a new, mini-series today entitled, "Back to the Basics." Many of you are young Christians, and this will be of great help for you. Many of you have known Christ for a lot of years, but we never outgrow our need for the basics. Not if we want to keep growing.

I enter this study with an assumption, that being that you *want* to be a good Christian. The longer I minister with people, the more I realize that most (though granted not all) who are in church genuinely want to succeed in the Christian life. They desire to please the Lord. They want to move ahead. They want to live lives that matter for God. But the reason they struggle is they either have not learned or are not living in light of the basics.

What does it take to have a vibrant Christian experience? There is danger in answering such a question since opinions abound, so we must be biblical. As I examine the Scriptures, I am impressed by three, non-negotiable basics which we must have (and continue to develop) if we are to prosper as Christians. Though John 15 will not be our text of study, we see these three basics delineated by the Lord Jesus there.

Here they are. The first basic is a growing *relationship* with Jesus Christ. Jesus said in John 15:4-5, "Abide in Me [that speaks of a relationship], and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself except it abide in the vine, no more can you, except you abide in Me. I am the vine, you are the branches...without Me you can do nothing." We'll consider this first basic this morning.

A second basic for successful Christian living is the *Word*. Again, Jesus said, "Now are you clean through the word which I have spoken unto you (John 15:3)." He elaborated in verse 7, "If you abide in Me, and my words abide in you, you shall ask what you will, and it shall be done unto you." The Word of God must be a vital dynamic in my life if I am to prosper in my Christian life. How does that happen? We'll see next week.

A third basic is related, *prayer*. In the Word, God speaks to us. In prayer, we speak to Him. We cannot have a growing relationship with Him if we ignore either. How's

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your prayer life? In two weeks, we will consider this third basic and explore the vital ingredient of prayer.

Are there other basics which are important to the Christian life? Indeed, but these three top the list. If we are to flourish as Christians, these three basics must be a continual reality in our lives. We must have a growing relationship with Christ, a life that is shaped by the Word, and a lifestyle that shows that prayer is priority.

It all starts with basic #1, a growing relationship with Jesus Christ. May I ask you something? Do you have that, a dynamic relationship with the Son of God? Some of you are thinking, "I'm not sure. What is it? How do you get it?" We'll learn this morning. And before some of the rest shift your minds into neutral thinking, "Well, I've already got a relationship with Christ, so this isn't for me," I would invite you to listen carefully. The first basic *isn't* merely a relationship with Christ, but a *growing* relationship with Him. Do you have that or do you feel a little stale? We all need to give attention to this first basic.

**Proposition: In order to have a growing relationship with Christ, we must recognize two essentials, as clarified in Colossians 2.**

- I. We must recognize the Imitation.
  - A. It promotes tradition over Christ (8).
  - B. It promotes regulations over reality (16-17).
  - C. It promotes personal experience over objective truth (18-19).
    1. Christ is the Head.
    2. We need Him.
  - D. It promotes externals over heart issues (20-23).
- II. We must recognize the Real Thing (6-7).
  - A. We learn how the Christian life begins (6).
    1. I must receive the Person of Christ.
    2. I must receive the Lordship of Christ.
  - B. We learn how the Christian life develops (7).
    1. We must be rooted in Christ.
    2. We must be built up in Christ.
    3. We must be established in the faith.
    4. We must abound in thankfulness.

Personal Inventory: Am I allowing His life to be reproduced in me?

1. Do I have a personal relationship with Christ?
2. Is it growing?

I. We must recognize the Imitation.

Many people are missing out because they're settling for an imitation substitute, and indeed, may not even realize it. My favorite candy is Marie's candy, which comes from a candystore in Logan County. There's nothing like the homemade quality of a Marie's mint-melt-away or a pecan turtle. But there's a way you could rob me of my appetite for Marie's candy. If you handed me a couple of Milky Way bars *first*, and didn't tell me that Marie's candy was available, I would gobble down the former and lose my appetite for the

latter. I wouldn't even want a piece of Marie's candy, not because it wasn't exceptional, but simply because I had already satiated my hunger with something of lesser quality.

Frankly, that's what many people are doing in the Christian life. They're settling for substitutes, an imitation brand of Christianity. Oh, there are some similarities, but these are canceled out by glaring alterations. If you want to be satisfied with a growing relationship with Christ, you need to beware of the imitation. It may come in four "flavors" as specified in Colossians 2.

The apostle Paul wrote this epistle to Christians facing a subtle threat from an imitation brand of true spirituality. In Colossians 2, he issues four warnings for Paul knew that no Christian can have a growing relationship with Christ (which is described in 2:6-7) if he is settling for substitutes. As we scan the second chapter, we learn four marks that can help us identify the imitation.

**A. It promotes tradition over Christ (8).** "Beware lest any man spoil you through philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, after the rudiments of the world, and not after Christ." The church at Colossae was under attack. Not by the Romans. Not by overt pagans, but by those who named the name of Christ. Pseudo-Christians. There was a dangerous slippery movement known as gnosticism that was infiltrating the assembly.

Tradition itself is not bad. It's the source of the tradition that's the issue. In Colossae, there were people who were promoting a legalistic approach to God. It was a tradition that originated with man, not God. More about this in a moment.

**B. It promotes regulations over reality (16-17).** Paul warns of this in verses 16-17 (NIV), "Do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration, or a Sabbath day. These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ."

Beware of people who try to reduce the Christian life to a list of do's and don'ts. "A good Christian uses a particular version of the Bible, wears a suit and tie to every church service, and sends his children only to Christian schools. A good Christian does not have a TV, does not participate in mixed swimming, and does not play cards."

A couple of years ago I heard professor David Warren speak on this text, and warn that we can slip into error one of two ways. One is through subtraction. That's what Liberal theology does. It alters the gospel by denying essential truth. It moves to the "left." But there's an even more subtle way we can slip into error, that's the danger of addition. It happens when we *add* our own dogma to Christianity. That's what the Legalist does. He strays, not to the left, but to the far right.

That's what was happening in Colossae. The church was facing the danger of addition. Pious sounding teachers were asserting that good Christians must abide by Mosaic demands and regulations. They judged people based on whether they kept dietary laws and special holy days.

My friend, please listen. Be careful of what you are dogmatic about. Are you dogmatic about your opinions and preferences? Remember, man-made regulations are a mere shadow of spirituality. Reality is found only in Christ.

**C. It promotes personal experience over objective truth (18-19).** A third warning, "Let no man beguile you of your reward in a voluntary humility and worshipping of angels, intruding into those things which he has not seen, vainly puffed up by his fleshly mind,

and not holding the Head..." Here's the NIV's description of this imitation Christian, "Such a person goes into great detail about what *he has seen*."

This approach to spirituality is alive and well in our day. Experience rules. It has become the test for truth in an age fascinated by new age thinking. When people look for a church, they want one that will help them have a "good experience," a church where they can "feel good," a church that has good programs for their family, never mind if the truth is taught.

That was happening in Colossae, too. An imitation flavor was enticing the people to abandon the importance of objective truth. What is objective truth? In verse 19, Paul underscores two essential truths being abandoned by the imitation.

1. *Christ is the Head*. Here's what the heretics were doing (19), "And not holding the Head." Beware of any person, no matter how spiritual, that refuses to live in submission to the headship of Jesus Christ. The objective truth is that Christ is the Head.

2. *We need Him*. "From whom the whole body...grows as God causes it to grow." It's a dead end street to turn to an experience-oriented brand of Christianity.

**D. It promotes externals over heart issues (20-23).** In verses 20-23, we learn more about the legalistic approach of the teachers in Colossae. They reduced spirituality to a set of rules, three of which we see in verse 21, "Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!"

Beware of reducing the Christian life to externals. Oh, it may be impressive, as Paul admits in verse 23, "Such regulations indeed have an appearance of wisdom, with their self-imposed worship, their false humility, and their harsh treatment of the body." What's the problem then? "They lack any value in restraining sensual indulgence (23b)."

Yes, God hates sin and so should we. To be specific, God hates sexual sin, but the solution for purity isn't a dress code. Why not? A dress code can't change a sensuous heart. It's like trying to fix a rusty side-panel on your car by spray painting over it. It may look nice for awhile, but the root problem is still there. Rules can't deal with the heart. Only a relationship with Christ can. It's to that essential we now turn.

## II. We must recognize the Real Thing (6-7).

We are facing a hodgepodge of religious influences today. In the name of Christianity, we see everything from political action groups to new age channelers to murderers of abortion clinic doctors. On the one hand we hear, "Good Christian boys don't go to movies, don't wear pony tails, and certainly don't wear earrings." Another voice responds and says, "No! Good Christians can do whatever they want. We're free. If I want to drink a glass of wine, play the Lotto, join the Masons, it's no problem as long as I *believe*. If you believe, that's all that matters, and I believe."

The question that begs to be answered is this. What's the real thing? What is true of genuine Christianity? Opinions abound, but God's Word alone must give us the definitive statement. Beloved, look out for any brand of Christianity that promotes human traditions over Christ, regulations over reality, personal experience over objective truth, and externals over heart issues, for that's the imitation. In Colossians 2:6-7, we discover the real thing. If you want to enjoy a growing relationship with Christ, you'll learn how right here. The apostle sums up the Christian life for us. We learn two truths.

**A. We learn how the Christian life begins (6).** "As ye have, therefore, received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk ye in Him." How does the Christian life begin? Paul reminds the Colossians how it began for them. He takes them back to their conversion and reminds them what they did. It's what you and I must do to become a Christian.

1. *I must receive the Person of Christ.* "So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord." How does a person become a Christian? By attending church or being baptized? No. By praying a prayer or signing a card? Not necessarily. The Christian life begins the moment I enter into a personal relationship with a Person.

What person? The text says, "As you have received Christ Jesus." Who is this Person we must receive? Don't miss this. To be a Christian, I must receive Christ as He is, not as I imagine Him to be. So Who exactly is He? As we scan the previous verses in Colossians, we discover Who He is.

Jesus Christ is the image of the invisible God (1:15), the Creator of everything in heaven and earth (1:16). He is the Revealer of God (1:19). He is the Reconciler (1:20), the only One who can remove the barrier between God and man. He is the One Who gave His life to make us holy (1:23). Christ is the hope of glory (1:27). He is the One Who changes lives (1:28). He is the treasure-chest of wisdom and knowledge (2:3).

May I ask you a question? Have you ever received *that* Christ Jesus? Sadly, many people have prayed a prayer to a very different Jesus. The reason they don't have a growing relationship with Christ is that they don't know the true Christ. Do you? To become a Christian, you and I must receive the Person of Christ.

2. *I must receive the Lordship of Christ.* "As you have received Christ Jesus *the Lord*." With the Colossians, Paul has in mind the time when Epaphras evangelized them and led them to receive Christ. But what does it mean to receive Christ Jesus *the Lord*?

Realize this. We do not *make* Christ the Lord, for inherently He is that. In Romans 10:9, Paul elaborates, "That if you will confess with your mouth the *Lord* Jesus, and shall believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you shall be saved." To receive Christ as Lord is to admit the fundamental truth about Him (and yourself). It's an acknowledgment of His authority and your need for Him. It's an admission of allegiance.

The obvious point is this. We begin the Christian life by submitting to Christ Jesus as Lord. But then what happens? Please realize this. The Christian life doesn't end when we receive Christ. That's merely the beginning according to verse 6. We receive Him *once*, but we are to walk in Him *daily*--"Just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live in Him." Getting saved is only the beginning, isn't it?

"As you have received Christ...so *walk* in Him." Walking speaks of the normal pattern of living. It suggests steady progress. The indicative leads to the imperative. Believing is connected with behaving.

You may be wondering, "I don't get it. How do we 'walk in' (or 'live in') Jesus?" Paul addresses that question in verse 7 where we learn a second key truth about the real thing.

**B. We learn how the Christian life develops (7).** We find four participles in verse 7 which modify the verb "walk" in verse 6. Christian maturity does not just happen. We have four obligations to meet if we are to develop in our relationship with the Lord.

1. *We must be rooted in Christ.* What does that mean? It's an agricultural metaphor. The word used for "rooted" offers a picture of a tree with its roots deep in the

soil. As a strong tree is deep-rooted in the soil so that it can draw its nourishment from it, so the strong Christian is rooted in Christ.

The tense of the verb is significant. "Rooted" is a perfect participle which suggests something that took place in the past, but whose effects persist in the present. Remember what Jesus said in John 15:5? "I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man *remains* in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing."

2. *We must be built up in Christ.* Paul moves from a farming image to a construction metaphor. Both are true of Christ--He is the life of the plant and the binding force of the building. At conversion, we were built on Him (Eph 2:20-22) and now we must be built up in Him. He is to be both the foundation and the superstructure of our lives. Are you building your life in Him?

3. *We must be established in the faith.* Here's the third participle, "Strengthened in the faith as you were taught." A couple of questions need attention.

What is "the faith"? It could refer to the faith of the Colossians, that is, "your faith," but that's not what Paul says. He says *the* faith, not *your* faith. I believe we should here take faith in the objective sense as a reference to the body of revealed truth (Carson, 60).

What does it mean to be "established" in the faith? The verb means "to confirm, to secure." It's the idea of strength. How does a person become strong? Think of a wrestler. How does a wrestler increase his strength? By sitting in the stands with his girlfriend? No! He hits the training room, and training involves effort.

What kind of effort is involved in growing in our relationship with Jesus? The next phrase gives us a hint, "as you have been taught." Think of the implication. God intends for His Church to be a greenhouse, a place where His people get rooted in Christ; a construction area, where disciples can be built up in Christ; and a training center which establishes Christians in the faith.

May I speak pointedly? A growing Christian is not a status quo Christian. It's a person who is growing and building and training. What's the goal? Christlikeness. God's goal is to see the life of Christ reproduced in us. Is that happening in your life? Would your spouse say you are more like Christ today than a year ago? If so, what will be true?

4. *We must abound in thankfulness.* "Overflowing with thankfulness." The word pictures a river overflowing its banks. Sadly, many of our lives are shallow trickles instead of mighty rivers (Wiersbe, 125). Did you realize that Paul refers to thanksgiving no fewer than six times in four chapters in Colossians. We ought to breathe the air of thankfulness.

The Christian life is not a grind. Hard, yes, a grind, no. We ought to abound in thankfulness. Are you a thankful person? If you are growing in Christ, you will be. Having said all that, the Christian life boils down to a question of personal inventory.

Personal Inventory: Am I allowing His life to be reproduced in me?

You say, "How can I tell?" Be honest as you ask yourself two questions.

1. *Do I have a personal relationship with Christ?* Do you? Are you sure? I'm convinced that many professing Christians have settled for an imitation brand of Christianity. If that's you, I invite you today to receive Christ Jesus the Lord.

Does that mean we'll never struggle again? Certainly not. Entering into a relationship with Christ is only the beginning, just like saying "I do" is just the beginning of the

adventure of a married life. We never arrive. The four participles in verse 7 speak of progression, development, and growth which leads us to a second question.

2. *Is it growing?* Is your relationship with Christ growing? Choose today to take whatever steps are necessary to grow in Him. We'll learn of one next week.

Response:

What a great privilege we have to enjoy a relationship with Christ! At times, we all get stagnant. We lose sight of God's goal for us in our relationship with His Son. The following song helps us to express to the Lord the desires that please Him.

If our servers will join me during the final verse.

*Hymn of Response: #387 "O to Be Like Thee!"*

The ordinance of Communion is a beautiful reminder to us of the basic necessity we have for a relationship with Christ. Apart from His atonement, we could not be in relationship with Him. He gave His life for us to redeem us, to cleanse us, to bring us to Himself. Let's abound with thanksgiving as we participate in the elements which remind us of His great sacrifice for us.

*Communion*

We need not wonder about our relationship with Jesus Christ. We can know that we know Him and that He knows us. That is the blessed assurance of which Fanny Crosby wrote. Let's sing this song of affirmation.

*Song of Commitment: #345 "Blessed Assurance"*