

Basic Christianity

Week Three

Review: So far we have discussed human nature, the human dilemma and what God has done to in Christ to reconcile us to himself. Tonight, we want to talk about living the Christian life. This is really exciting. Christianity is a relationship with God. But how do we develop this relationship? How do we draw near to God? What kinds of things should we expect as God works in our lives? These are some of the questions we'll get into tonight.

The Holy Spirit

Jesus' death on the cross tore down the dividing wall between fallen people and God. When we receive the death of Christ personally, we are "justified." Justification means that our sins are forgiven. Because we are justified, God begins a life long work of restoring our lives to his design for us. Remember when Adam and Eve fell, the image of God in them was distorted. They became alienated from God, themselves, each other and from the environment. The Christian life is a process of healing and transformation in which God "conforms us to the image of his son" (Romans 8:29).

How does God accomplish this work? Through the Holy Spirit, the third member of the trinity. Before we talk about what the Holy Spirit *does*, let's consider who he *is*.

Who is the Holy Spirit?

- *He is not an "it."* We may think of the Holy Spirit as a power or energy, an impersonal force in the world. But the Bible is clear that he is a personal being.
 - John 14:16,17. Masculine pronoun in reference to the Holy Spirit intentionally violates Greek grammar. *Pneuma* is a neutral noun.
 - He is characterized in personal terms. He possesses intelligence (1 Corinthians 2:10,11); he can be grieved (Ephesians 4:30); he can be lied to (Acts 5:3,4); he has a will (1 Corinthians 12:11).
 - *The Holy Spirit is God.* He is equated with God (see Acts 5:3,4; 2 Corinthians 3:17). Further, he does things that only God can do. He is involved in creation (Genesis 1:2; Psalm 104:30, Job 33:4); he is omniscient (1 Corinthians 12:11,12); he is omnipresent (Psalm 139:7).
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What does the Holy Spirit do?

Old Testament vs New Testament. It is important to note that the Holy Spirit's work in the world is different today than before Jesus' death and resurrection.

- In the Old Testament: Holy Spirit's work was *temporary* and *selective*:
 - He gave the prophets their messages (Acts 1:16, 1 Peter 12:11)
 - He "came upon" judges to provide charismatic leadership (Judges 14:6)

- The prophets hoped for the Holy Spirit. The prophets spoke of a day when God would effect a new covenant with his people. This new era of God's work would be characterized by the *permanent* indwelling of the Holy Spirit in *all* of God's people (see Ezekiel 36:27; Joel 2:28; Acts 2:16-18). So in the New Testament, the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in believers is the sign that God has saved them and fulfilled his promise of a new covenant (Romans 8:9; Ephesians 1:13,14).
- Why is there a difference between how the Holy Spirit works in the Old and New Testament? The answer is given in John 7:39:

"But this he spoke of the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were to receive; for the Spirit was not yet given, because Jesus was not yet glorified"

Only after a provision was made for sin, could God enter into a person's life. It's through the Holy Spirit that God manifests himself in our lives. Jesus said at the end of his ministry that it was to his disciples' *advantage* that he go, so that the "Helper" would be sent (John 16:7). What is the advantage of the Holy Spirit? One of the best passages to understand what the Holy Spirit does is John 14 and 16. I suggest you read this section of scripture. Here, we will summarize some of the important ministries he does.

Ministries of the Holy Spirit in the New Testament:

- *Conviction* (John 16:8-11). The Holy Spirit speaks through people's conscience. He exposes guilt and the need for forgiveness. This lays the ground work for evangelism. When we share Christ with our friends, we need to trust that God's Spirit is personally confirming the truth of what we say. It may not be apparent to us, and it may be a process of some time, but God is wrestling with fallen people's rebellious hearts.
 - E.g.: People who come to teachings and say, "I thought he was talking about me."
- *Assurance*. God wants us to know that we are fully acceptable to him. He doesn't want us to go around wondering if he accepts us today (see Romans 8:16; 1 John 5:13). Assurance is vital for a dynamic Christian life. How can we be vulnerable to some one, and entrust ourselves to them if we are not fully confident in their unconditional acceptance of us?
- *Illumination*. The Holy Spirit helps us to understand and apply what God has revealed in his Word and in prayer (see John 16:13; 1 Corinthians 2:11,12). When we read the scripture or hear a teaching we find an inner conviction that what we are hearing is true, that it speaks to our lives. We just know that what we are being confronted with is from God. We should ask God to reveal his will for us as we get involved in the Bible.
- *Comforter* (John 14:26; 16:7). God is actively involved in all of our circumstances. He enables us to make sense out of the seemingly fragmented experiences of life. That's why Paul, for example could remain hopeful and visionary even in the middle of serious opposition and suffering (2 Corinthians 4:7-12).
- *Empowering* (Acts 6:8-10). The Holy Spirit provides the ability to serve beyond our natural

abilities. We can impact people spiritually, because he gives us the wisdom and insight they need. We should pray that God would empower us to serve him. There is a real difference between social work and Christian service. It's the difference between imparting the life of God and simply meeting a need.

Principles of Spiritual Growth

The most basic question in spiritual growth has to do with our identity. If we answer the question, "who am I," then what we are growing into becomes clearer. An acorn is a seed. So growth means being transformed into an oak tree. Paradoxically, our identity as Christians is really the same as goal of spiritual growth: *We become who we are*. Now this is a strange concept. Consider an illustration: Coronation of an 11 year old king. He has the identity of king and all of the legal rights of the king, but he does not have the full freedom to exercise those rights. He has to learn how to possess what is already his. It's kind of that way for us. As we grow spiritually, we learn more and more to exercise our identity as Christians.

Sometimes this distinction between our identity in Christ and our need for growth is called *position* and *condition*.

- Position: Who I am as a Christian, my identity
 - Condition: Process of exercising my identity in Christ
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Key identity(position) truths:

- Adoption as God's children (Ephesians 1:5)
 - A new creation (2 Corinthians 5:17)
 - Right standing before God (2 Corinthians 5:21; Ephesians 1:7)
 - Freedom from the authority of sin (Colossians 2:11,12; Ephesians 2:1-7)
 - Separation from the world system (Galatians 6:14; John 17:16; Ephesians 2:2,3)
 - Membership in Christ's body (John 17:21-23; I Corinthians 12:27)
 - Future inheritance (1 Peter 1:3,4; Ephesians 1:11,14; Romans 8:16)
 - Unique role in God's plan (Ephesians 2:10)
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Appropriating our identity(affecting our condition)

Even though our identity is secure in Christ, we don't always experience life that way. As Christians, we find ourselves ensnared by many of the same habits, thought patterns and hang ups as we had before. Our identity in Christ seems like an abstract thing. When we recognize that there are things in our lives that are really inconsistent with our identity in Christ, we've become aware of the *flesh*. The flesh is our fallen nature that we've cultivated and nurtured before we received Christ. Now as Christians, we need to learn what it means to live as new people, with a whole new identity.

- Illustration: "Shawshank Redemption": Prisoner released after a lifetime of captivity. He just couldn't adapt to his new identity. It's a real struggle.
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But the Bible provides us with what we need to learn how to appropriate our identity as God's children.

Romans 6: Know, Consider and Present.

- *Know* (Romans 6:6-9). We have to *understand* what is true of us if we are to grow spiritually. What's your identity? There are lots of definitions for who we are in the world. We have to know first and foremost what God says is true of us.
 - Illustration: Emancipation Proclamation of 1863 meant that all slaves were now legal citizens. Their identity had legally changed from property to citizens with all of the rights that go with it. The slave owner no longer had the legal right to treat his slaves as property.
 - Our flesh may bark out commands like the cruel slave master, but it lacks the teeth to back up the commands. We are not slaves to our flesh.

 - *Consider* (Romans 6:11). Consider means "to reckon" or count on the facts. We must not only affirm what is true of us, we must *personally* apply it. Maybe every thing in our being cries out against what is really true. We are at an important crossroads in our spiritual life. What will we choose: flesh or identity? We've got to make some conscious decisions against the flesh.
 - As habitual ways of dealing with things and motivations get exposed, we need to say, "I know that's the way I've been living, but it's just inconsistent with who God has made me."

 - *Present* (Romans 6:13). Knowing is an intellectual affirmation, considering is counting it as true in a personal way. But to present means that we act on it. To complete the Emancipation Proclamation analogy, for the slave to "present" himself as a free man, he'd have to take some specific action. He might leave the plantation, refuse to work unless he receives a wage, etc. So too, as Christians, to present ourselves, is to do things that promote our new identity, and demonstrate independence from the flesh.
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Walking by the Spirit

"If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit." Galatians 5:25.

Now we know that to grow spiritually, we have to know who we are. And we've also seen how we must take a course of action to experience the reality of our new identity. But now the question before us is, "what kinds of action are we to take?" This may be one of the most confusing issues for Christians. As we get embroiled in the struggle between the flesh and our new identity, we often set out to change things on our own. We try our best to quit doing what we've become aware is wrong. This is what the Bible calls *legalism*.

Living under the law.

Legalism is an attempt to reform our flesh. It is the attitude or belief that our acceptance is based on *performance*. Legalists are usually motivated by guilt and the belief that they will succeed if they just try a little harder. We say things to ourselves like: "I'm just going to quit thinking those evil thoughts"; "From now on I'm going to be the kind of father, husband and employee I know I should be"; "I'm really going to try to be a better person now." As noble as these thoughts might seem, they are destined for

failure. Our efforts at self-reform won't work and it's very destructive. Legalism breeds attitudes and thinking that actually drives a wedge between ourselves and God's work in our lives. Consider some of the most common effects of legalism:

- *Self-punishment.* Legalists make vows not to sin. Then, when the vow is broken, they are plagued with guilt. Guilt drives them to perform acts of "penance" to undo the sin. The cycle goes on like this until either the sin is rationalized away ("I guess it's not really all that bad"), or the legalists concludes that there's just no hope for them ("hey, that's just the way I am--you'll just have to accept it").

 - *Duty focus.* The Christian life is driven by a sense of obligation. Service to others or participation in fellowship is viewed as something we "have to do." Legalists often resent ministry, but at the same time, derive their identity from it because they get positive reinforcement.

 - *Condemning others.* Legalists are able to see all too clearly the failures of others because they are so preoccupied with their own. It makes the flesh feel better to knock your neighbor down a few notches. They experience the momentary delusion of moral superiority.
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Legalists are confused on two points. First, the law's purpose--written on our conscience or in the Old Testament was not to make us better people. Rather, in both cases, it was to show us that we can't live out God's standards (Romans 7:18; 1:18,19). The law functions like an x-ray. It shows us what the problem is, but can't do anything about it. Note what Paul says about the Law in 2 Corinthians 3:5-7,

"Not that we are adequate in ourselves to consider anything as coming from ourselves, but our adequacy is from God, who also made us adequate as servants of a new covenant, not of the letter, but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life. But if the ministry of death, in letters engraved on stones, came with glory, so that the sons of Israel could not look intently at the face of Moses..."

Second, the biblical focus for Christian growth is not on our selves and "how we're doing." It's on God and what he's doing.

The Spirit-led life.

"If you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the Law" Galatians 5:18.

To be "led by the Spirit," or to "walk by the Spirit" means that we depend on God both for our life direction (Ephesians 4:1,2) and his empowerment to pursue his course (Ephesians 3:20). Let's consider together some of the aspects of the Spirit-led life. *Walking by the Spirit is:*

- *An imperative* (Galatians 5:16). We are commanded to walk by the Spirit. That means that there is a choice to be made. We do not *naturally* entrust the direction and empowerment of our lives to God. Neither will we go on "automatic pilot" by having some kind of ecstatic experience. We need to make daily, moment by moment decisions. "Lord, I really want you to take control of my life today. Help me see things through your eyes. Develop in me your heart for the people you send into my life."

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- *Mental orientation* (Romans 8:5-6). The mind is never free of influence. We will either be conformed to the world system, or "transformed by the renewing of our minds" (Romans 12:2). What we choose to dwell on is really important. When we're not concentrating on work or school, what fills our minds? And are we able to "take our thoughts captive to the obedience of Christ" (2 Corinthians 10:5). Most people are passive intellectually. I've never met a growing Christian who wasn't critically engaged mentally, both to biblical truth and to assessing the world around them.
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- *Prepared to serve* (Galatians 5:13). How different this is from the preoccupation with self that comes from legalism. Since God is love, those who are led by him will find themselves characterized by love. God is interested in dealing with our reliance on the flesh. He wants to purge us of our worldly and selfish thinking and behaviors. But, thankfully, he doesn't show us all of our problems at the same time. He graciously shows us the issues he's concerned about in the context of a life-style of Christian ministry. It's here that we discover our failures to love as Christ does. That really sets the priorities for sanctification.
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- *Awareness of inner transformation* (Galatians 5:22-24). The Bible discourages introspection-- constant reflection on our motives, failures, etc. But one way we know that God has been guiding our lives is through deep character change.
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- *Getting regular feeding*. What we have discussed so far in walking by the Spirit has to do with inner attitudes and thinking. But there are specific ways God communicates his will for our lives and strengthens us spiritually. As we gain mastery in these areas, we'll really be maturing in our Christian life. But that's what next week's lesson is about.