

# Discipleship 101

a beginner's guide to Christianity

## Chapter 20

# The goal of the Christian life

**W**hat is the goal of the Christian life, and how do we help one another get there?

One old catechism says that our chief goal in life is to glorify and enjoy God forever. This is true. Scripture says that we were created for God's glory and to proclaim his praises (1 Corinthians 10:31; Ephesians 1:11-12; 1 Peter 2:9). We exist to worship God, and in order to be genuine, this worship must come from the heart. It must be a genuine expression of our real feelings. We adore God above everything else, and we submit to his every command.

How do we help people get to this point? I think we are simply unable to achieve such a task. It is God who changes people's hearts; it is God who converts the soul, who leads people to repentance, who touches people with love and grace. We can describe God's amazing love and his astonishing grace and we can set an example of adoration and dedication to our Savior, but after all is said and done, it is God who changes each person's heart.

Yet another way to describe our goal in life is to become more like Christ—and here I think we can briefly sketch some practical ways in which we can help one another as we grow toward that goal.

It is God's plan for each of us that we "be conformed to the likeness of his Son" (Romans 8:29). Even in this life, we "are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory" (2 Cor. 3:18). Paul labored with the Galatians "until Christ is formed in you" (Galatians 4:19). He told the Ephesians that our goal is "attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ" (Ephesians 4:13).

In Christ, we have a new identity and a new purpose for living. The new self is "to be like God in true righteousness and holiness" (Ephesians 4:22-24). What a concept! We are to be like God not just in the resurrection, but even, to the extent possible, in this life. We are becoming like Jesus, who showed us what God is like when living in the flesh. We are not just hoping to be like him in the next life—we are already to be like him in this life.

Obviously, we do not need to look like him physically. We do not try to match his carpentry skills, his language skills, his knowledge of agriculture or Roman history. Rather, we are to be like him "in true righteousness and holiness." In our behavior and in our devotion to God, we are to be like Jesus Christ.

### ***Be transformed!***

How is the transformation accomplished in our lives? Paul exhorts, "Be transformed by the renewing of your mind" (Romans 12:2). Our new self "is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator" (Colossians 3:10). Both heart and mind are involved. Behavior is, too. These three work together in those who are being transformed by Christ.

The mind alone is not enough. If only the mind is involved, we may be like demons who know truths about God but do not obey him. Simply knowing the truth is not enough. We must not only hear, but we must also *do* (Matthew 7:24).

Behavior alone is not enough. If we go through the motions without really believing in God, we are

play-actors. And even if we believe in God and do the right actions, if our heart is far from God, our worship is in vain. If we sing God's praises without really feeling any affection for him, we are hypocrites.

In short, we need right beliefs, right actions, and right emotions. If the heart is right and our beliefs are right, then right behavior will be the result. We *want* right behavior, but we need to remember that it is the result of other things, and not the ultimate goal.

Now, as I asked in my introduction, how do we help one another grow toward our Christian goal? How do we help one another become transformed to become more like Christ in righteousness and holiness?

### **Several steps**

I see three or four steps in the process. First, there is conversion. We can preach the gospel—and we should!—but God is the one who must change the hearts and produce a response. We should present the gospel message as clearly as we can, in as many ways as we can, with biblical terms and with modern terms, but we do not claim credit for the effectiveness of God's message. We just want to be faithful stewards, delivering the truth that God so loved the world that he sent his Son to rescue us from our sin.

Second, there is nurture. Jesus commanded his disciples to make more disciples, to make more students, to teach them the things he commanded. Paul instructed Timothy, Titus, and others to teach the truths of the Christian faith. Doctrine is important, and this is an area that Scripture specifically instructs us to work on. Every church leader should strive for accuracy in doctrine, as defined by Scripture.

I wish that doctrinal orthodoxy could be easier to achieve. We all need to distinguish essential doctrines from nonessential doctrines. We cannot make every theological conclusion a test of true Christianity. Even some of the "essential" doctrines are not essential for a person's salvation, but they

are essential for a church to be faithful transmitters of God's message.

Third, in addition to doctrinal nurture, there is also nurture of the heart. This is why Christian growth should occur in *community* with other Christians. Social experiences, that is, the things we do *together*, help us grow emotionally. These may be positive emotions such as love and forgiveness, or the negative emotions that result from the sin that inevitably comes with interpersonal relationships. These painful feelings probably help us grow much more than the positive feelings do as we learn to cope with them and work through them with God's loving support and help.

The social/emotional nurture cannot be done in a book—it is done locally, through small groups and other informal relationships, guided and modeled by pastoral leadership. The pastor helps people grow not by doing everything for them (even if that were possible), but by teaching and equipping members to do it themselves, for one another. The best quality of pastoral care is found in small groups. Members who choose to be in a small group are in effect choosing to get themselves more intimately involved in the pastoral care of the church. Small groups help make a church healthy.

### **Behavioral changes**

When members are growing in doctrinal understanding, coming to *know* God more, and in emotional maturity, coming to *love* God more, they will be growing in other ways, too. Their behavior will be changing. They will be treating one another with more love, patience, joy, peace, humility and forgiveness. They will be avoiding sexual immorality, greed, and dishonesty.

The more we know and love God, the more we live like him. The heart change causes a change in behavior. The heart change is what gives room for the Holy Spirit to work in our lives.

These behavior changes are rooted in a changed heart, but the process is often slow. Pastors have a responsibility to continually encourage behavior changes so that Christians new and old, strong and

weak, will be encouraged to live up to the new life God is creating in them. God is working in us, but he does not do it for us. He changes our hearts and gives us what it takes to respond to him in righteousness, but he expects us to exercise the faith to *use* this “freedom to obey” that he has won for us.

People who flaunt their immorality are not members in good standing. We welcome repentant and struggling sinners, but not unrepentant, uncaring ones. Our model is Jesus Christ, who welcomed white-collar criminals and prostitutes, but did not welcome people who thought they had no need for repentance.

As we strive to imitate our Savior and Teacher, Jesus Christ, we need to look especially at his relationship with the Father, and his relationship with the people around him. His relationship with the Father was characterized by prayer and by his thorough knowledge of and reliance on Scripture.

Prayer and study have formed the core of Christian spiritual growth for centuries. They are important! Why? Not as another “duty” or legalism, but as the way of being with God so that we can

hear his voice in our lives and be reminded of our true condition: that we are redeemed from sin, we belong to him, our salvation is secure in him, he loves us infinitely, he is our ever-present Helper and he will never leave nor forsake us.

Jesus was committed to people—he loved the lost, and he criticized people who thought they were religiously superior to others (a feeling that usually stems from a works-oriented approach to worship). He was committed to a close relationship among believers—his disciples related not just individually to him as students to their teacher, but also to one another. Jesus formed them into a group, a body, that would in time give itself mutual support, a community that would reach out to others and invite them in.

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