

Discipleship 101

a beginner's guide to Christianity

Chapter 19

Christian life

When we accept Jesus Christ as our Savior, we have begun the Christian life. But accepting Christ is only a beginning—God isn't finished with us yet.

After we come to faith, what do we do? How does faith make a difference in the way we live? What does God want to do with us? How does he want to change us? And how do we make the transformation easier?

God's goal in our lives

God wants each of us to “be conformed to the likeness of his Son” (Romans 8:29). We are in the process of “being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory” (2 Corinthians 3:18). Paul worked so that Christ would be “formed” in the believers (Galatians 4:19). He described our goal in this way: “Attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ” (Ephesians 4:13).

As children of God, we are to become more like the Son of God. He is not only our Savior, he is also our example, showing us what humans should be like. When we believe in Christ, we have a new identity and a new purpose for living. Our new identity is “child of God.” Our purpose is “to be like God in true righteousness and holiness” (Ephesians 4:22-24)—we are to act like the new person that we are.

What an enormous goal! We are to be like God. God is changing us to be more like himself—more like Jesus, who showed us what God is like when living in the flesh.

Obviously, we cannot make ourselves Godlike. But God can—and he is! He does not do this against our will, but only as we agree to what he is doing. And by the Holy Spirit working in our hearts

and minds, he is helping us agree. “It is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose” (Philippians 2:13).

We do not need to be like Christ in carpentry skills, cultural customs or physical appearance. Rather, we are to be like him “in true righteousness and holiness.” In our morality and in our devotion to God, we are to be like Jesus Christ. That is the purpose of the Christian life, that we grow to be more like him.

We need to be changed on the inside, in our thoughts. Paul says, “Be transformed by the renewing of your mind” (Romans 12:2). We are “being renewed in knowledge in the image of [our] Creator” (Colossians 3:10). When we think like Christ, we will be like him.

Submitting ourselves

God is the one who does the work, but we are involved. We can resist his work, or we can submit ourselves to cooperating with it. In the history of Christianity, three practices stand out: prayer, Bible study and worship. Millions of Christians have found that these practices (sometimes called spiritual disciplines) help us to present ourselves to God for him to do his work in our hearts and minds.

In prayer, we acknowledge our need for God. We are reminded that he is our standard, the reference point for our lives. We grow in love for God by praising his power and thanking him for his mercy. We set each day in its proper context, praising him for every good thing and acknowledging his purpose for our lives. We confess our needs and seek his help, not just for our physical needs but also for the spiritual transformation that we also need.

Prayer was a constant part of Jesus' life, and if he needed it, we need it even more. But sometimes it is difficult. We don't always know what to say, what to ask, or how to praise. It isn't easy to set aside time. But we need to—regularly.

In prayer, we not only talk to God, we also listen to what he says as the Holy Spirit may bring certain thoughts to our minds. How do we know whether those ideas are from God, or merely from our own brain? To discern the difference, we need training in the mind of God—training that we get in Bible study.

Scripture was important to Jesus. He knew it well and considered it authoritative. He used Scripture to reject the devil's temptations (Matthew 1:1-11). He said that we should not "live on bread alone"—we also need "every word that comes from the mouth of God" (verse 4).

We need the words of Scripture. God caused these books to be written for our instruction and encouragement (2 Timothy 3:16). Scripture helps change our thoughts to be more like Christ's.

The early Christians devoted themselves to learning doctrine from the apostles (Acts 2:42). We get the same teachings from the New Testament. Part of God's plan for our transformation is the study of Scripture. He doesn't force us to do it—it's our choice.

It isn't always easy—for two reasons. First, parts of the Bible are hard to understand, and sometimes the meaning is debatable. There is depth in Scripture that can last a lifetime. We understand some of it the first time, a little more the second time, and a little more the third time. So we can't expect to understand it all right away. It's helpful to focus on what we do understand, not on what we don't.

However, for most people, the hardest part about Bible study is taking the time to do it. We need to make it a habit, a regular discipline. Many Christians find it helpful to read a small portion of the Bible each day, thinking and praying about it. Devotional books are often helpful. The main thing is to form a habit, and keep at it.

Worship is a third discipline that helps us grow to become more like Christ. Jesus said that God is looking for people who will worship him sincerely

(John 4:23). The early Christians devoted themselves to fellowship, breaking bread and prayer (Acts 2:42). They gathered for worship. The more we worship God, the closer to him we will be. Our faith will be stronger when we are in frequent contact with others who have faith.

There are many other spiritual disciplines, or tools for spiritual growth. These include meditation, fasting, solitude, simplicity, generosity, service and others. In all these, we must remember that spiritual growth is not our own achievement. We do not become like Christ through self-discipline. Rather, the disciplines are merely a way to let God do his work with less resistance from us.

Jesus Christ as Lord

In the Greek New Testament, one of the most common titles of Christ is *kyrios*, usually translated as "Lord." This Greek word could refer to a landowner, a government official or another person of authority. It could also refer to God, as it frequently did in the Greek translation of the Old Testament.

When the Roman emperor wanted people to call him *kyrios*, he was claiming to be "the" lord, the supreme authority—and Christians refused. Instead of saying "Nero is Lord," they would say "Christ is Lord," even though it sometimes cost them their lives. Although they obeyed Roman laws whenever they could (Romans 13:1-7), they could give unqualified allegiance only to Jesus Christ. Only he has supreme authority. He is the Lord.

Peter tells us, "In your hearts set apart Christ as Lord" (1 Peter. 3:15). As our Lord, Jesus is two things: Protector and Boss. We are to trust him and obey him. He who gave his life for us can be counted on to give us what we need.

This does not mean everything we want, and it doesn't always mean health and money. In fact, Jesus may even give us trials (Acts 14:22; Hebrews 12:5-11), but we need to trust that he knows what he's doing, that it is for our good.

The apostle Paul had many trials, but he "learned to be content whatever the circumstances" (Philippians 4:11). Sometimes he was poor, and sometimes he had plenty, and Christ was his source of strength even when he was hungry (verses 12-

13). His Lord provided as much as he needed at the time. Sometimes he provided a way to escape a trial; sometimes he provided strength to endure it.

Our Lord is also our Master, who gives commands and expects us to obey. Paul talked about the obedience that comes with faith (Romans 1:5); James said that faith without obedience is dead (Jas. 2:17). In our actions, we show whether we trust Christ. He died for us, and in response, we live for him and serve him (2 Corinthians 5:15). We offer ourselves to God, to be used in righteousness (Romans 6:12-13).

Faith, hope and love

Why should we obey God? The simplest reason is: It's our duty. Through his death on the cross, Christ has purchased us (Acts 20:28), and it is only fair that we do what he says. We are children of God, and we are to do what he commands. Of course, we do not obey in order to be saved. Salvation comes first, and obedience should follow.

But obedience goes deeper than duty. Obedience should come from the heart, done because we want to, not grudgingly, because we have to. So why should we want to obey? There are three main reasons: faith, hope and love.

In faith, we believe that God's commands are for our own good. He loves us and wants to help us, not give us unnecessary burdens. As our Creator, he has the wisdom to know how we should live, what works best and what causes the most happiness in the long run. And we have to trust him in that; his perspective is much better than ours.

Obedience expresses faith in his wisdom and love. Obedience is what he made us for (Ephesians 2:10), and life works better if we are in tune with the way we were made.

Obedience also involves hope in a future blessing. If there is no future life, then Christianity would be foolish (1 Corinthians 15:14-18). Jesus promised that his disciples would find eternal life worth far more than anything they might have to give up in this age (Mark 10:29-30). Everyone who is saved will have the joy of knowing God in eternal life, but there are also rewards in addition to eternal joy.

Jesus encouraged his disciples to "store up for

yourselves treasures in heaven" (Matthew 6:19-21). Several of his parables indicate that we will be rewarded for what we do in this life. God rewards those who seek him (Hebrews 11:6).

Paul also wrote about rewards: "The Lord will reward everyone for whatever good he does" (Ephesians 6:8). This is not talking about salvation, but about rewards in addition to salvation. He described the judgment as a fire that tests the quality of every person's work. "If what he has built survives, he will receive his reward" (1 Corinthians 3:14). If it is burned up, he will lose it, but he will still be saved (verse 15).

But reward is not the only reason we work, for we are children of the King, not employees who do only what we get paid for. Our final motive for obedience is love. This includes love for people around us, because they will be better off if we obey God than if we do not. God's instructions are sensible, not arbitrary rules. They help people get along with other people.

But most of all, it is our love for God that causes us to want to obey him. He has done so much for us, that we cannot help but be thankful and want to please him. "If you love me," Jesus says, "you will obey what I command" (John 14:15). "If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching" (verse 23). John later wrote, "This is love for God: to obey his commands" (1 John 5:3). "The man who says, 'I know him,' but does not do what he commands is a liar.... But if anyone obeys his word, God's love is truly made complete in him" (1 John 2:4-5).

Obedience can also tell other people that we love God. Obedience says that he is great and good and wise, and we adore him. Obedience says that God is important to us, that he is valuable, that he deserves our loyalty. Let your good deeds be seen, Jesus said, so that people can see them "and praise your Father in heaven" (Matthew 5:16).

"Live such good lives among the pagans," Peterer wrote, "that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us" (1 Peterer 2:12). A good example can help people be favorably disposed to God. "Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ" (Philippians 1:27).

Help the gospel be associated with good things, not bad. Our love for God means that we want to bring him favorable publicity, so that others will come to love him, too. A bad example will bring the gospel into disrepute (Titus 2:5). Those who flaunt their sins cannot be counted as members in good standing (1 Corinthians 5:1-13).

Sanctification

Much of what we have been discussing comes under the theological term *sanctification*, which means “making holy.” Through his death on the cross, Christ has already sanctified us (Hebrews 10:10). That means he has set us apart for himself, for his use. We are holy, and Scripture frequently calls us “saints”—which means “holy ones.” We are dedicated to God.

But in another sense, we are still in the process of being made holy (verse 14). The work is not yet done. Perhaps you’ve noticed that our behavior isn’t always what it ought to be. In the process of sanctification, our thoughts and behaviors are being brought into conformity with what they ought to be. We are holy children of God, and we ought to live like it.

Although God enables and energizes this process, Christians have an active part in it. They are repeatedly told to think, speak and act in certain ways. “Continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose” (Philippians 2:12).

God “has saved us and called us to a holy life,” Paul wrote (2 Timothy 1:9). He exhorts us to offer our bodies as living sacrifices, doing the will of God (Romans 12:1-2). He encourages us to “live a life worthy of the Lord” and to “please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God” (Colossians 1:10).

“It is God’s will that you should be sanctified ... that each of you should learn to control his own body in a way that is holy and honorable.... For God did not call us to be impure, but to live a holy life” (1 Thessalonians 4:3-7). “Make every effort to live in peace with all men and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord” (Hebrews 12:14).

To be like Jesus, to live like Jesus—this may seem like an unrealistic goal. But it is our goal nonetheless, for God is the one doing the work in us. Despite our inabilities, we can be confident that he will finish the work in us (Philippians 1:6). Although our progress may sometimes seem slow, we trust in Christ, not in ourselves.

Paul expressed an excellent attitude: “Not that I ... have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me” (Philippians 3:12). Christ has taken hold of us for his purpose, which is that we are to be conformed into his image. So we press onward, confident in him, striving to do his will.

“One thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus” (verses 13-14).

Press onward!

Michael Morrison

<p>We believe that Christians should gather in regular fellowship and live lives of faith that make evident the good news that humans enter the kingdom of God by putting their trust in Jesus Christ.—<i>Statement of Beliefs of the Grace Communion International.</i></p>
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