

STANDARD C - WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE A PART OF THE PEOPLE OF GOD?

Lesson 7: How May We Grow as Christians?

Introduction

Jesus once told a story about two men who set out to build houses (Luke 6:46-49). The first man carefully planned how to build his house. He knew he would have to dig down to solid rock if the house would last a long time. This he did. First, he built a foundation on the rock. Then he began to build the house upon the solid foundation. He anchored the house on the rock. He was wise. But, the second man did not plan carefully. He thought that digging down to the rock before building was a waste of time. So, he just built his house on soft, sandy soil. The second man was foolish.

For a while, both houses looked strong and secure. Later, it started to rain. In fact, there was so much rain the land flooded. The water rose and began to flood the two houses. The first house that was built on the solid rock stood firm against the raging water. This house was anchored securely. So, when the floodwater disappeared, the house still stood. The wise man had made a wise choice. But, as the raging water rose around the second house, the sand beneath it washed away. The house did not have a solid foundation. Since the house had no place to rest, the raging flood water tore it to pieces. The foolish man had made a bad choice.

A. We Grow as Christians by Choosing the Right Path.

Jesus said the two men and the two houses are like some people who begin to walk on the path to discipleship. Some people are careful to anchor themselves firmly into Christ. They diligently seek what it means to be a disciple. They completely put themselves under Jesus' teachings and instruction. They have chosen the right path.

Other people gladly rush to become Jesus' disciples. But, they never turn away from their sinful and foolish ways and behavior. They do not dig down deeply and anchor themselves to the Rock, Jesus Christ. They have not chosen the right path.

When the "storms" and "floods" of life come, the disciples who carefully build on Jesus will stand firm. When temptations come, they have the strength of Jesus in them to help stand against the tempter. But for people in the second group, temptations sweep them away. The storms and floods of life just bury them. When they face resentment or persecution, they just quit. When the time comes to witness for Jesus, they have nothing to say. When other people watch their lives, these people can see no difference between being Jesus' follower and being a sinner.

Question: Why was the first builder wise, and the second builder foolish?

Question: What is the right path to choose to help people grow as Christians?

B. We Grow as Christians by Learning from the Right Teacher.

To be a disciple of Jesus Christ means we will be students in His school. Christ becomes our teacher. He will walk along with us in all of life's situations. He will teach us to follow Him.

Christ calls all His followers to become like the wise man who built his house upon the rock. Christ will teach his followers how to do this. He will empower them. He will instruct all who will listen. But Jesus does not force anyone to become His disciple.

A tree sapling begins to grow and may eventually become a large tree with many limbs. What if the sapling were to say it already knows all about being a tree? What if it were to stop there? What a horrible mistake this would be. Just so, Christ wants new Christians to continue to grow in their knowledge of Him.

New Christians know Christ has forgiven and made them children of God. The new life of forgiveness is wonderful. The joy of being a Christian is real and should continue forever. That is the foundation upon which we build. But, there is so much more Jesus wants to teach us.

A person who builds a house will finally complete it. A tree finally reaches maturity and stops growing. But Christians never finish building their Christian "house." The Christian "tree" never stops growing. Christians who don't know this finally stop looking like a disciple of Jesus. Their Christian "houses" begin to look old, run-down, and unappealing. Their Christian "tree" withers, cracks, and ceases to bear fruit.

C. We Grow as Christians by Facing and Overcoming Temptations

One thing that happens to new Christians is the devil tempts them to turn away from Christ. They are tempted to give up their new life in Christ and return to their old ways. The new way of discipleship can seem very difficult at times. Everything seems so different. Old friends and the old life beckon and tempt new Christians.

The devil tempted Jesus in the early days of His ministry. This happened after John the Baptist had baptized Jesus. (See Luke 4:1-13.) Jesus was in the wilderness or desert for a long time where He ate no food. He became hungry. The devil tempted Him to turn a stone into bread. Jesus rebuked the devil. Jesus said obeying and serving God is more important than food. He said we should live on the strength of God's Word, which is His food to us (Matthew 4:4).

Later the devil said he would give to Jesus all the kingdoms of the world. All Jesus would have to do would be worship the devil. The devil wanted Jesus to turn His trust and attention away from the Father. But Jesus said we should worship God and serve only Him.

Then the devil tried to get Jesus to leap off the top of the Temple. The tempter wanted Jesus to force God to prove that God would keep Jesus from harm. If Jesus had tried to

make God act in that way, He would not have lived in trust. In this temptation, Jesus taught us that His disciples should not go around telling God how He should be God. They should not test God. Instead, they should live by trusting in God's Word alone. Disciples trust God's faithfulness and goodness alone. Nothing can ever happen to them that can separate them from God's love and care.

We learn several things from how Jesus faced temptation.

1. Jesus did not rely on His own strength. That is the way Christians should always deal with temptations. Jesus walked in daily obedience to His Father and knew Him. Christians daily grow in their knowledge of the Lord. So, when temptations come, Christ will not be a stranger to them. Jesus must be their daily companion, their daily teacher.
2. It is not a sin to be tempted. Jesus was sinless, and still the devil tempted Him. Sin comes from giving in to temptation, not from being tempted.
3. God will give us victory over temptation if we rely fully on Him.
4. We become stronger in the Lord as we overcome temptation. The Bible says after Jesus overcame the tempter He returned to Galilee filled with the "power of the Spirit" (Luke 4:14).
5. Anyone can be tempted. If Jesus could be tempted, then so can we. Christians should never think they are so strong they cannot be tempted.
6. No matter how long we serve the Lord, we may be tempted throughout our lives. Luke tells us the tempter left Jesus alone "until a more opportune time" (Luke 4:13).

Question: What were the temptations Jesus faced and overcame?

Question: What can we learn how to face and overcome temptations from Jesus' example?

D. We Grow as Christians by Living by Grace Alone.

In the story Jesus told about the man who built a house upon the rock, the house stood firm because it was anchored in the rock. People become Christ's disciples by His grace alone, by being anchored in Christ alone. Grace is God's loving favor He freely shows toward us. Good character, good works, or good thoughts about oneself are worth nothing. Only God's love and grace make us Jesus' disciples. We are forgiven and changed by God's grace alone.

This is the way we begin as Christians, and this is also the way we continue and grow as Christians. No matter how long a Christian lives, he or she must always depend completely on God's grace. It is possible for Christians to forget we must depend completely on God's grace. Some people begin to depend on their own good deeds or accomplishments. They begin to think God loves them because they are good and successful. When this happens, they move away from Christ. They also forget God loves and redeems sinners. They forsake God's attitude toward the lost. No one can really follow Jesus who loses a desire to see sinners turn to Jesus (Luke 7:40-50; 15:1-32).

Jesus met some people who thought Jesus should receive them and reject the sinner named Zacchaeus. They were gently surprised to see Jesus go home with Zacchaeus and not with them (Luke 19:1-10). Those who think God should love them but not sinners will not be compassionate as Christ is compassionate. They will not be able to witness to Christ as He wants them too.

Question: What is grace?

Question: How do Christians grow by depending on grace alone?

E. The Gospel of Luke can help us grow as Christians.

Jesus taught His followers about growing as Christians. Here are some of His teachings.

1. Jesus said that just as good trees bear good fruit, so His disciples will bear His fruit (Luke 6:43-45). Christians do not live for themselves. They live for Christ, and their lives should show they belong to Him. This means that just as a tree's fruit tells us about a tree, a disciple's life should tell about Jesus. Jesus said, "I am the vine; you are the branches (John 15:5). So, a Christian daily grows as one who bears the fruit of Christ. A disciple grows in his or her ability to hear clearly the voice of the Lord. This happens through prayer, Bible study, and learning from wise Christians who live now as well as long ago. Christians are lighted lamps that should give Jesus' light to others (Luke 11:33-36).
2. Christians should grow in their ability to announce the presence and power of God's Kingdom. After Jesus had spent quite some time teaching His 12 disciples. He sent them out to proclaim the power of God and to heal. He gave them power and authority over all demons and to cure diseases (Luke 9:1-6). Disciples who walk with and are taught by Jesus should grow daily in their ability to announce the Gospel to others. They should grow in their ability to explain the Kingdom of God with power. Jesus taught the Kingdom of God would grow and spread as yeast leavens flour (Luke 13:20-21).
3. Jesus said, "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will save it" (Luke 9:23-24). Growing Christians increase in their desire and ability to identify with Jesus and not those who oppose Him. Jesus went to the Cross because He identified with sinners. The Son of God was not ashamed to identify with us. Jesus' disciples will not be ashamed of Him in the world (Luke 9:27). They will take up their cross and follow Jesus. Christ's disciples do not look for a life of ease. They serve Jesus and others. In return, they do not want to be served (Luke 22:24-27).
4. Growing Christians will increase in their ability to trust God and will rely less on their themselves. Jesus had a lot to say about people who trust money, power, position, and possessions more than they trust God. Such persons actually worship these things as though they were gods. But Jesus said His disciples would

stop trusting in the old gods. They would trust the Heavenly Father more and more.

Jesus said life is more than food, and the body is more than clothing (Luke 12:22-31). He said we should learn a lesson from birds, lilies, and grass. The birds don't sow and reap. The lilies don't toil or spin. The grass is alive one day and burned up the next day. Yet they trust God. How much more should we trust God? Jesus once met a man who wanted to be His disciple. But he could not do so. The reason was that he trusted his wealth more than he trusted God. He could not follow Jesus because he loved his money more than he loved God (Luke 18:18-30).

5. Disciples of Jesus grow in their ability to be good stewards of things that belong to God. As they do, God can entrust to them His possessions more and more (Matthew 25:14-30).
6. Jesus' disciples will grow in their compassion for the people who are oppressed. Jesus said that people who don't know what God is like seek power. They try to be friends with people they think are important. They want to gain power also. They give good things to powerful people so they can get much in return. Jesus said His disciples should be different than these people.

Because Christians already have the greatest treasure in Jesus, they don't have to lust for power or riches. Jesus told His disciples they should use their power and money to strengthen the "poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind" (Luke 14:12-14). Faithful disciples of Jesus should increase, not decrease, how they use their resources for the Kingdom of God (Luke 16:1-13). Jesus told about a man who thought he was a child of Abraham. But he refused to use his wealth to serve the poor. While poor Lazarus suffered, the rich man ate the best food that could be found. That man went to hell (Luke 16:19-31).

7. Disciples of Jesus grow in their ability to see all things through the eyes of Jesus. This happens because their minds are being renewed in the image of Christ. One day, Jesus saw a poor widow put two small coins in the offering at the Temple. He saw rich people putting in their offerings as well. But Jesus said the poor widow had put in more than even the rich people. The disciples missed what Jesus saw, because they did not see things through His eyes. They still had much to learn. Jesus said rich people gave from their abundance and still had much left over. The poor widow gave all she had, even her money for daily living (Luke 21:1-4).
8. Growing Christians increase in their understanding of what it means to serve Christ in the Church. Some people forget they are Christ's servant and they are to be servants in the Church. They begin to lust for positions and power in the Church. They are even willing to use the things of God for their own selfish purposes. Just before Jesus went to the Cross, He said, "The greatest among you should be like the youngest, and the one who rules like the one who serves" (Luke 22:26b).

- Jesus said even He is among us as “one who serves” (Luke 22:27b). If Jesus sees himself as a servant, how then should we, Jesus’ disciples, see ourselves?
9. Jesus’ disciples should increase in their understanding of His crucifixion and resurrection. On the first Easter, Jesus met and walked along with two of His disciples (Luke 24:13-27). These disciples were puzzled and did not understand the events of the past few days. So Jesus began to instruct them. He began with Moses and all the prophets and explained things about himself in all the Scriptures. Later the same day, Jesus taught more of His followers. He opened their minds to understand the Scriptures (Luke 24:36-49).

 10. Growing Christians will be Jesus’ witnesses. They will know they have been sent by Jesus into the entire world to tell the Good News. But they can do this only as the Holy Spirit gives them the power to do so. Growing Christians will live and witness in the power of the Holy Spirit (Luke 24:48-49).

Question: What is meant by the statement: “Christians do not live for themselves”?

Question: What does it mean to take up your cross to be Jesus’ disciple?

Question: How does a Christian show trust in God?

Question: How can a Christian show compassion for oppressed people?

Question: How can a Christian be a servant in the Church?

Conclusion

When Jesus comes to live in us, He does not leave us as He finds us. He works in us so we will daily grow in His likeness. Christians should never stop becoming more like Jesus in all parts of their lives. Jesus promised the Holy Spirit would be present in us to teach us what being a Christian involves. The apostle Paul told young Christians they should put their old lives and failures behind them. Each of us should say, as Paul did: “I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 3:12-14).

Activity: Think about how you are growing as a Christian. Make a list either on paper or in your mind. Discuss these ways with some other person whom you trust. Choose one way you can grow as a Christian and do it during the next week.