

The Fundamentals Of Christian Growth

Five Key Themes Of Scripture Regarding Change And Growth

It was Vince Lombardi, the great Green Bay Packers' Head Coach, who, upon arriving, stood before his team and said, "Gentleman, this is a football!" He then proceeded to show these professional football players how to run the ball, catch the ball, throw the ball, and kick the ball. Though the players first thought of this as a demeaning and pointless exercise, they eventually caught on to the importance and significance of what this coach was doing. He was emphasizing the fundamentals of the game. And what happened? His team did well; very well. There would always be the latest and greatest new football fad, but it was the team that did well at the basics that played the best and won!

To put it simply: Christians today have forgotten the fundamentals. We are obsessed with the latest and greatest Jesus crazes. Why is it, then, when such fads are easiest to read, watch, or talk about, Christians are more immature than ever, Christian marriages are more fragile than ever, Christians families are more stressed than ever, and Christians themselves are experiencing more addictive behaviors than ever? When it comes right down to it, we still are not well versed or practiced in the basics of Christianity. Then we wonder why we get stuck and the Christian faith does not seem to "work"!

We need to get back to basics; back to the fundamentals. We need to be to habitually reminding ourselves of the fundamental truths of the faith in the mundane times of the Christian walk as well as in the more intense times. In the ministry to which God has called me, He has given me the opportunity to walk beside people in some of the most difficult times of life. As I listen to these people and as I examine my own struggles, I have noticed that there are certain themes that constantly appear when life goes wrong. Not all of these themes always appear, but at least one always appears when we struggle with growing and changing. I began to see these areas as the fundamentals; basic truths that we forget or get wrong that play out in great ways as we do life. I have become convinced that, while doing the fundamentals will not eradicate struggle, believing these fundamental truths will orient our struggle properly and give hope that our struggles are not only not insurmountable, but are actually opportunities for the very growth and change we are struggling to do. In this article, we will look at five fundamentals to the Christian life.

1. Life Is Fundamentally About Living For The Glory Of God

Key Idea: Motive

Key Verses: 2 Corinthians 5:9- "Therefore we also have as our ambition, whether at home or absent, to be pleasing to Him."¹

In this verse, the Apostle Paul is discussing the fact that he wants to be in heaven with God, beyond the pain, beyond the struggle, and beyond sin. But the fact is: he isn't. He is still here, on earth, fighting the battle with sin every day, and so are we. But he reasoned that, if heaven is great because we can live holy lives before God without sin, then that was how he would strive to live while on earth.

Since creation in Genesis 1:1, life was meant to be about God. Psalm 104 teaches that all of creation was meant to bring God honor, glory, and praise. However, we are, as sinners, "glory hogs." We resent, either secretly or openly, that we are not the focus of the universe. Ever since Genesis 3, with the fall of Satan, Adam, and Eve, mankind has sought to take the glory and honor for itself. Evolution calls it survival of the fittest, our culture calls it the American dream, but the Bible calls it pride. Pride is desiring to lift myself higher, based on my achievement or perceived needs and values, than God has declared me to be. Thus, life becomes all about us. But if God is truly the Creator, Sustainer, and Lord of heaven and earth, then life was meant to be about Him! Our marriages, children, jobs, hobbies, churches, and all other activities were meant to be God's party, to bring Him pleasure through our trust, obedience, and thankfulness to Him. But life goes wrong when we start acting like all these things were meant to be ends in-and-of themselves.

I was talking with my nephew one afternoon. I married his aunt when he was four and so he and I were still attempting to get to know each other. Every time I see him, I try to make head-way in our relationship. As I was talking with him, I noticed that he was wearing a racing shirt. I thought to myself, "This is great! I can use this as an opportunity to talk about something he likes." So I asked him, "Do you like racing?" In response to this question, I received an enormous smile. "Oh yeah!" he said, with much excitement. Then, wanting to ride this train of

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excitement just as far as I could, I asked, “Who’s your favorite racer?” At this point, I expected to hear a typical response such as Jeff Gordon, Dale JR., or Mark Martin. So you can imagine my surprise when, without missing a beat and with all the confidence in the world, my nephew responded, “McQueen.” If you do not know who “McQueen” is, his full name is Lightning McQueen and he is a talking cartoon race car from the Disney movie “Cars.” My nephew did not “get it.” There is a whole world of racing that Lucas was oblivious to. To him, racing all came down to talking cars. But we, as Christians, often do not “get it” either because we think life is all about our plans, purposes, and goals.

Ultimately, we get this principle wrong because we forget an important facet: God’s glory is also our greatest good! Psalm 34:8 states, “Oh taste and see that the Lord is good! How happy are those who take refuge in Him.” When we walk in obedience to Christ, it transforms our own experience. For example, the husband who yells at or hits his wife for perceived failure will receive neither peace, nor happiness. But the husband that seeks to please God by loving his wife well and serving her will experience joy, possibly through the appreciative response of his wife or more primarily through the joy of pleasing the Lord, regardless of his wife’s response. So we see that when we live life attempting to hog the glory, life goes wrong because we are missing the point. But when we do life for the glory of God, when we lay our goals, dreams, fears, and desires at His throne and say, as in Luke 22:44, “Not my will, but yours be done,” life begins to fall into place. This what Jesus meant when He said in Matthew 6:33, “But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.”

2. The Gospel Is Fundamental To Our Entire Christian Experience.

Key Idea: Provision

Key Verses: 2 Peter 1:3-4- “Seeing that His divine power has granted to us everything pertaining to life and godliness, through the true knowledge of Him who called us by His own glory and excellence. For by these He has granted to us His precious and magnificent promises, so that by them you may become partakers of *the* divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world by lust.”

It was comedian Steve Martin who was once asked how to become a millionaire. He responded to the effect of, “That’s easy! First, get a million dollars!” Does anyone else feel like he is missing a step? When it comes to doing the Christian life, often we fail because we treat it as if it is up to us and we are missing an important step.

Though life is fundamentally about God’s glory, the problem is that we want the party to be about us! We are like the child who, at another child’s birthday party, sits and pouts, throwing temper tantrums and seeking to ruin the fun for everyone else because we want the attention. Romans 3:11 states it as “As it is written, “THERE IS NONE RIGHTEOUS, NOT EVEN ONE; THERE IS NONE WHO UNDERSTANDS, THERE IS NONE WHO SEEKS FOR GOD.” This attitude, which the Bible calls sin, is the heart of our struggle. It robs God of His rightful glory, separates us from Him, keeps us running the other way, and ultimately, Revelation 20:11-15 declares, earns mankind the death penalty in Hell for divine treason. Yet, Romans 5:8 makes it clear that God, even though we rebel, loves us still and wants a relationship with us.

That is what Jesus is all about. The Bible calls Him the Christ, the Son of God, the Messiah, the Lord, and many other names. John 1:1-18 describes Him as being God come to dwell in human flesh. While here, Jesus, born of a virgin, sinless, holy, and compassionate, healed the sick, cast out demons, and preached the truth. Yet, the greatest thing He did is called the Gospel (a word from the root of “good news”). 1 Corinthians 15:3-4 states it as, “...that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures.” Again, in 2 Corinthians 5:21, Paul states, “He made Him who knew no sin *to be* sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.” This great exchange means that Jesus, the perfect God/Man died in our place, paying the penalty of the sin of the world.

This exchange brings to the believer a relationship with God, bringing us freedom from the penalty of sin, the power of sin, and one day, in heaven, the presence of sin. Because Christ, the righteous God, died in the sinner’s place, God forgives our sin, the Holy Spirit comes to live inside us spiritually, and we have a settled, eternal destination with God. It is against this background that Paul writes, in 1 Corinthians 6:20, “For you have been bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body.” Though God created us, sustains us, and loves us, as sinners, we rebel against God. That is why the cross is so important. Because we could never save ourselves, Christ died and rose again in our place.

The best news is that this great exchange is a gift. It is a gift to all who will “repent and believe the Gospel,” as Jesus stated in Mark 1:15. Baptism, church membership, good works, none of these things can save. Only faith in Jesus, crying out to

God in prayer, can restore the relationship between creation and Creator.

This truth means that at no point in the life of faith can the Christian claim that he or she did not have what was needed to do what God commanded. Whether or not a spouse acts biblically, we have all we need to live godly lives because we are free from the power of sin and the Spirit lives in us. Whether or not parents or children act godly, we have all we need to do what God has called us to do. Whether or not our boss, our co-worker, our friends, our church family, or that obnoxious driver in the lane next to us acts in a godly way, we, because of the Gospel, have all we need for life and godliness through faith in Jesus.

3. The Heart Is The Fundamental Target Of Change.

Key Idea: Target

Key Verses: Luke 6:43-45- “For there is no good tree which produces bad fruit, nor, on the other hand, a bad tree which produces good fruit. For each tree is known by its own fruit. For men do not gather figs from thorns, nor do they pick grapes from a briar bush. The good man out of the good treasure of his heart brings forth what is good; and the evil *man* out of the evil *treasure* brings forth what is evil; for his mouth speaks from that which fills his heart.”

Often, when it comes to change, people fall into the trap of believing that the biggest problems they face are outside of themselves and their control. Thus, biology, peer pressure, culture, personal examples, or situations become our focus and we become trapped in an endless maze of “if only’s.” “If only I didn’t have this mental or physical handicap. If only my friends or family were more supportive. If only I had better parents. If only my situation was different. Then I could...” fill in the blank.

Yet the truth that Jesus taught is an incredibly freeing and scary fact: our biggest problems are not outside of us. Our biggest problem is what is inside us. Christ describes this by teaching that the heart, which the Bible defines as the real us and is identical with the words soul, spirit, mind, will, is the root of all behavior. We will always become on the outside a shade of what we are on the inside. All those things mentioned before will affect the taste, look, and texture of the fruit, but make no mistake, an apple seed, no matter what soil or environment it is planted in, will only produce apples.

The passage reveals that we will always be ruled by what we treasure, by whatever we see, in each movement, as most valuable and important. If I believe that the glory of God is most important and I value pleasing Him and becoming more Christ-like,

my behavior will look very different than when I value, supremely, personal comfort, physical relationships, perceived success, and the like. The Old Testament had a word for these God replacements: idolatry! Ezekiel 14:4 discusses idols of the heart. Though we would never say we worship idols, the kind that you bow to, sacrifice to, confess to, or obey, we all have things in our lives more important to us than God. We act as if these things should be our source of hope and faith for doing life right, rather than the true and living God.

While people’s actions may change through simply modifying behavior, the heart cannot change until one recognizes the false gods being pursued. So how does the heart change? One word: repentance. This is a turning from self to God. It is, in prayer, a heart commitment to let go of the things we demand from God and to submit to Him.

4. Change Is Fundamentally A Process, Not An Event.

Key Idea: Process

Key Verses: Ephesians 4:22-32-“That, in reference to your former manner of life, you lay aside the old self, which is being corrupted in accordance with the lusts of deceit, and that you be renewed in the spirit of your mind, and put on the new self, which in *the likeness of God* has been created in righteousness and holiness of the truth. Therefore, laying aside falsehood, SPEAK TRUTH EACH ONE *of you* WITH HIS NEIGHBOR, for we are members of one another. BE ANGRY, AND *yet* DO NOT SIN; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and do not give the devil an opportunity. He who steals must steal no longer; but rather he must labor, performing with his own hands what is good, so that he will have *something* to share with one who has need. Let no unwholesome word proceed from your mouth, but only such *a word* as is good for edification according to the need *of the moment*, so that it will give grace to those who hear. Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you.”

A few years ago, a certain company had a commercial campaign using an “easy button.” The whole point was that characters in these commercials would push the “easy button” and every challenge they had would suddenly change and be what they desired. Wouldn’t it be great if change worked like that? We know what God is calling us to do, but it will be a struggle. But with the “easy button,” we could just push it and the struggle would be over.

POOF! But this is not how change works. We often fail to experience true and lasting change because the struggles last longer and are more intense than we were mentally prepared to face.

In Ephesians 4, the Apostle Paul highlights the fact that change does not simply happen when we pray, when we decide, or when we feel guilty. Change happens when we practice what we have decided. Though the Christian is no longer defined or enslaved by the flesh, is indwelt and being renewed by the Spirit, and is now defined as holy and blameless (Ephesians 4:22-24), this is not necessarily the experience of Christians. Paul then instructs the Ephesians to practice the pattern of “put off” and “put on” in the way they do life. This pattern, like taking off a dirty coat and putting on a clean one, mirrors what God has already done in our hearts. We have put off slavery to the flesh, so we shouldn’t be involving ourselves in slavery to the flesh. We have put on righteousness in our standing before God, therefore we should live righteously before God. We shouldn’t do things that are solely self serving. Rather, we should do things that serve God and others first.

This process is not an overnight, do it once and we have it right, process. It takes discipline. It takes work. It takes effort. This is where the “spiritual disciplines” come in to play. Bible study, prayer, fellowship with believers, witnessing. These things build the put off and put on pattern into our lives.

5. The Church Is Fundamental To Our Continual Growth As Christians

Key Idea: Community

Key Verses: Hebrews 10:24-25- “And let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging *one another*; and all the more as you see the day drawing near.”

The February before I wrote this article, my favorite football team, the Denver Broncos, made it to the Super Bowl. It was interesting to hear how I, and other Broncos fans, talked during that period. We would often say things like, “We are going to the Super Bowl,” or “We are going to beat the Seahawks.” We often passionately identify ourselves with a given team. The obvious point here is that we, in actuality, were going to do nothing but sit on our couches, eat chips, and WATCH our team play. Why do we talk this way? Because we want to identify with something bigger than ourselves. The good news is that this is the exact thing God wants for us too!

The Gospel states that Jesus did not just die for an individual, but for all men. 1 John 2:2 states that

Jesus died for the sins of the whole world. So by the death of Christ alone, the collective nature of God’s program is immediately on display.

The Bible uses a Greek term for “assembly” when talking about this group of people. We often translate this word as “church.” It is interesting to note the descriptions and titles that God assigns to this group in Scripture. For example, the Bible calls the church the “body of Christ” in 1 Corinthians 12:12 and it is called the “bride of Christ” in Revelation 21:9.

But what is the point of the church? The passage quoted from Hebrews 10:24-25 highlights the purpose very well. The church as a whole exists to glorify God by encouraging and challenging each other in the walk of faith. It is made up of growing individuals whom God uses to impact other growing individuals. God saves us to change us and He changes us to use us.

Why is this important? It is important because the Christian life often goes wrong when we live like the Christian life is intended to be private, personal, and perfect and so many treat the ministry of the church as simply a convenience or even as a hindrance. But in reality, the Christian life is meant to be public and it is by nature imperfect. We all need help. There are no Lone Ranger Christians! We are often overwhelmed by the trials of life and the church exists to provide people to encourage those going through hard times to persevere and to endure. But on the other hand, by nature of being sinners, we also can be incredibly blind to our own sinful struggles. We can be blind to how our behavior is demonstrating idolatry or how it is harming other people. This is why God gives other believers to help us see our struggles through more mature, objective eyes. We must seek to encourage others in the walk of faith and to allow others to encourage and challenge us in our walk as well.

To summarize, the Christian life is meant to be lived for the glory of God by the power of the Gospel in the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus and the indwelling Holy Spirit. This is done as God reveals the things our hearts long for other than Him, as we put off those things and put on godly desires and actions that demonstrate trust and joy in and obedience to God. But this is not meant to be done by ourselves. God has called us to join with other Christians in the battle to provide encouragement, accountability, and strength. So commit to these fundamentals and practice them often. You will be surprised how much growth and victory you see!