

INTRODUCTION

Followers of Jesus were first called “Christians” (in Antioch) because they were “like Christ.” How well does today’s Christian community stand up to that test? Would we be so labeled if we weren’t already known as such?

God’s Word and the example of Jesus offer a clear definition of what “Christian” means. Sadly, they present measures of spiritual vitality that few dare to even dream of today, but which are His full intention for us even now. There is to be righteousness, peace and joy in the storms of life because our soul is anchored in Christ. And love, mercy, humility and servanthood because we have found our significance in Him and have been made whole.

There is power in prayer and other ministry because our hearts are washed clean and we are filled with His Holy Spirit. We can have focused lives because we are given to the building of His Kingdom from whatever station in life He has placed us in. We can be deeply satisfied because we are vested in something that is bigger than life. And undaunted by world events because of a compelling sense of being a stranger on this earth; one whose real home is elsewhere. We can live at a level of holiness that confirms our anticipation of our Lord’s return! Yes, THAT is what Jesus has provided for us. THAT is the norm! And that is what the word “Christian” means.

But let me ask - how well do we understand the quality of life that Jesus has provided for us, and the purpose to which we are called? Where is the spiritual vitality that would enable us to reproduce the life of Jesus in others? Why have we not been salt and light to America in a way that our freedoms were preserved and our nation’s future assured?

Isn’t “getting saved” the primary message in some churches, Sunday after Sunday? And isn’t “being good enough to go to heaven when I die” sometimes more our standard than living a God-honoring life that draws others to Him? How much thought and effort are given to spiritual maturity in the typical American church? Aren’t there many who are “born again” but who remain spiritual children their whole life?

Have some Christians secretly given up all hope of truly being like Jesus because of overwhelming struggles and failures? Have some succumbed to being satisfied with avoiding obvious evil (or at least being caught at it), and simply hope to hang on until Jesus takes them home? Have we possibly accepted as normal, a sub-standard definition of Christianity?

Have still others defined faithfulness in terms of legalism, tradition, form or a set of beliefs; having the right words and looking good in a certain way but having little of the richness that Jesus provided for them? Is the fruit of the typical American Christian abundant, or sparse?

I say confidently that: a) the abundant and fruitful Christian life is the Biblical norm; b) it is within our reach but; c) there is a price to be paid if we want to experience it. There are loyalties to be decided. Affections to be sorted out. “Crosses” to be taken up. Issues in the most innermost parts of our heart to be confronted. Powers to be dethroned.

The path to the abundant life will be marked by periods of painful wrestling as we struggle with the patterns that now shape us, and as we combat the inner voices that make them seem indispensable. It is no help to us that the institutional church has approved of them.

There will be periods of loneliness in our pursuit of God, as we separate from our old ways and the popular “Christian” norms. We will become a stranger to others and even to ourselves, but we will be at peace. We will increasingly feel the warmth of friendship with God, and will develop a taste and even a craving for the Life that is produced by our newfound intimacy with Him. The ecstasy of drawing close to God will eventually trivialize the pain and loneliness of the journey.

These lessons are designed to help us on that wonderful pilgrimage. The path from “saved” to “born again and becoming more and more like Jesus.” None of the topics presented here is exhaustive. I can only hope to provide a framework that stimulates and supports your own pursuit of godliness and faithfulness.

One potential pitfall in a study like this is that we might feel so far from God’s plan for us that we don’t even try to advance. Please don’t let that happen. Please know that God does not require human perfection of us. He only requires sincerity and humility; that is, sincerity in pressing toward Christlikeness, and the humility to acknowledge our weaknesses and failures and to deal with them before Him. Even repeatedly! Christian growth is a *process*, a *life-long* process!

These lessons were first written in the early 1990’s for Bible Institutes in Kenya, Africa, and are now revised for the Church in America. Each focuses on one small but important aspect of Christian growth. There are many more and some will come to your mind as you read.

Not all lessons have the same format. For example, some have the scriptures written out and others have only the text, depending on space and other factors. And some are much “heavier” and more deeply challenging than others.

These lessons don't need a "teacher" as much as a facilitator when they are used among serious Christians, i.e. those who study and prepare in advance. To those who stand before such a group, I beg you - trust God's Holy Spirit to enlighten minds and hearts as you study this material together. Your main role is to keep the dialogue on track and to create the environment in which members feel free to share insights, ask questions, make confessions, and testify about how God is applying His Word to their life. Try that!

I pray that this study will be as instructive and stimulating to you as it is to me. May we together hear and obey God's call to a more dynamic walk with Him. May we passionately long to see the image of Christ formed in us. The increase of love, joy, peace and fruitfulness will make the effort more than worthwhile! And the future reward is out of this world!

Your fellow pilgrim,



Ken Stoltzfus
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To Be Like Jesus

Theme song for this study

To be like Jesus, to be like Jesus
All I ask - - is to be like Him
All through life's journey
From earth to glory
All I ask - - is to be like Him

An old Christian chorus, author unknown