



The Beginning of Wisdom:

An Introduction to Christian Thought and Life

Chapter 11: Developing Personal Wisdom

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"Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come." —2 Corinthians 5:17 (English Standard Version)

Essential Questions

- How do beliefs impact one's behavior?
- How does faith express itself in love in the Christian life?
- How does a Christian receive power for spiritual growth?
- What does it mean to be united with Jesus, and how does this practically influence the Christian life?
- How do the truths of the gospel impact the Christian life?

Introduction

One of the core beliefs of the Christian worldview is that God has already begun his work of restoring creation in the life, death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus. God's kingdom or righteous reign was inaugurated in Christ's first coming, and it continues even today. It is true that God's work of restoration will not be completed until Christ's future return. Nevertheless, people can experience life in God's kingdom now in significant ways.

It must be remembered that restoration on both a personal and cosmic scale is needed because God's original purpose for creation was disrupted by the fall of humanity. Adam and Eve were originally created to reflect God's image in every aspect of their lives through faith and obedience to him as the sovereign Creator of all things, and this reflection of God's image was to express itself in right relationships with God, with one another, within themselves, and with creation. As Adam and Eve lived in faith and obedience to God, they fulfilled God's original purpose for their lives. Specifically, they fulfilled their purpose for loving God and loving one another well. They fulfilled their vocational purpose of being good stewards of God's creation, and they would fulfill their missional purpose of filling the earth with descendants who would know God and would love him and others.

However, as Genesis recounts, humanity rebelled against God. They refused to believe God's words and disobeyed his command in Genesis 2:15–17. Consequently, humanity entered a state of brokenness, and this brokenness had devastating impacts on every aspect of their lives and on all the created order. Yet God promised in Genesis 3:15 that one would come to bring deliverance to humanity, and through his life, death, burial, and resurrection, Christ offers the opportunity for human beings to experience this deliverance and a restored relationship with God. This restoration begins in the lives of people when they place their faith in Christ, and it also provides the assurance that God's restoration will one day be fully completed for humanity and the physical creation. This chapter will focus on the personal aspect of God's work of restoration in Christ. It will explore how Christians can develop personal wisdom as they live out their salvation in Jesus by the enabling power of God's Spirit.

Belief and Behavior

The idea of faith is an important aspect of the Christian life. It is not only the way believers enter a personal relationship with Christ; it is also how they live each day in their relationship with Christ. Yet, Christians still struggle in their walk of faith. For example, the very first disciples struggled to believe the news of Jesus's resurrection. In fact, one of Jesus's disciples is commonly known as "doubting Thomas" for this reason. Thomas said, "Unless I see in his hands the mark of the nails and place my finger into the mark of the nails, and place my hand into his side, I will never believe" (John 20:25b).



The Incredulity of Saint Thomas, by Caravaggio, c. 1602. Sanssouci, Potsdam, Germany.

However, Thomas experienced a powerful transformation in his life when he saw Jesus alive from the dead and placed his faith in him. After Christ invited Thomas to examine his wounds, Thomas's transformation was conveyed in his famous confession of faith: "My Lord and my God!" (John 20:28b). Thomas went from saying, "I will never believe" (John 20:25b) to saying, "My Lord and my God," (John 20:28b) and the pivotal point in this transformation was his faith in Jesus's resurrection. Faith led Thomas from a posture of doubt to a posture of devotion. His belief led to a transformation of his behavior. Simply put, Thomas's faith in Jesus led to Thomas's worship and love for Jesus, and this is how faith works in the life of every believer in Christ. Jesus's words at the end of his encounter with Thomas pronounced a blessing on all who would believe in him in the future: "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed" (John 20:29b).

The core beliefs of a worldview shape the behaviors of those who subscribe to it. In relation to the Christian worldview, those who have faith in Christ respond to him in love, and this love is expressed to Jesus and others in practical ways. Thus, the transformation of faith expresses itself through love and shows how Christians are experiencing God's work of restoration in reflecting his image in their lives.

Faith Working Through Love

Faith expressing itself through love is the essence of following Christ or discipleship. Discipleship is the process of following Jesus and growing in Christian maturity. This spiritual growth process occurs as Christians follow Jesus's example and implement his teachings in community with other believers by the power of God's Spirit. In other words, discipleship is living out the reality of God's salvation in Christ daily and in practical ways.

Jesus accomplished everything necessary to restore a person's relationship with God, and when an individual receives God's salvation through faith, they enter a right relationship with God at that moment. They are immediately transformed into a new creation in Christ (2 Corinthians 5:17). However, while a transformation occurs spiritually and inwardly when people believe in Christ, they do not automatically live out this reality from that point forward. Rather, life's journey for Christians is the process of living out what God has accomplished for them in Christ.

Newness of Life

Being "born again" implies that salvation is the threshold to a new life, and this is precisely how Paul described one's transition into the Christian life. In Romans 6:4, he wrote, "We were buried therefore with [Christ] by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life." Just as physical life is marked by birth and stages of successive growth, so it is with the Christian life. Furthermore, just as the deoxyribonucleic acid (DNA) for adults is present in them as newborn children, so it is that the identity of Christ is present in new Christians at their spiritual birth.

Faith is a vital aspect of the ongoing Christian life, and Jesus emphasized the ideas of both faith and discipleship in Mark 8:27–38. Christ's teachings in this central biblical text shows how faith expresses itself through love in following him.

The Example of Jesus

In Mark 8:27–38, Jesus asked his disciples two important questions. His first question was, "Who do people say that I am?" (Mark 8:27b). Jesus's disciples replied, "John the Baptist; and others say, Elijah; and others, one of the prophets" (Mark 8:28b). While those opinions of Jesus were complimentary in nature, Jesus did not accept them. Instead, he asked his disciples a second question. Really, his second question was the same as the first but phrased in a personal way. Jesus was looking for his disciples to give a different answer from other people when he asked: "But who do you say that I am?" (Mark 8:29b). At this point, one of Jesus's disciples, Peter, answered, "You are the Christ" (Mark 8:29c). Peter's response to Christ's second question was an expression of his faith.

Jesus's dialogue with his disciples on this occasion gets to the heart of what it means to begin a life of discipleship. To enter a relationship with Christ, a person must answer Jesus's question about his identity for themselves. People may give an intellectual nod to popular opinions of Jesus that may be complimentary in nature; however, this does not necessarily mean they believe in Christ as he revealed himself.

Furthermore, true faith in Jesus also means that a person is willing to count the cost in following Jesus. For example, shortly after Peter answered Jesus's second question, Christ told his disciples that he would "suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes and be killed, and after three days rise again" (Mark 8:31b). Jesus did not come to be served; instead, he came to serve and to give his life for others (Mark 10:45). Christ demonstrated the greatest expression of love by laying down his life (John 15:13). He trusted his Father's plan and gave his life in love to God and for his love of others. In this way, his life is the perfect example of faith expressing itself through love.

After Jesus explained to his disciples that he was going to give his life in sacrifice, he invited everyone who would follow him to count the cost of sacrifice in their own lives. He said, "If any would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me" (Mark 8:34). In order to understand Jesus's teaching here, it is helpful to elaborate on the points Jesus made about following him in Mark 8:34.

To begin, followers of Christ must deny themselves. This means that Christians, like Christ (Mark 10:45), do not live to be served but to serve to others. They seek to live with humility. Jesus knew that he had a legitimate claim to be served by others (John 13:13), yet, after washing his disciples' feet, for example, he said, "If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet" (John 13:14). Discipleship means following Jesus's example by denying oneself (Philippians 2:1–11).

Next, Jesus's followers take up their cross. The idea of a cross should call to mind the complete sacrifice Jesus made to save humanity, and Christ calls his followers to lay down their lives sacrificially in service as well. Paradoxically, Jesus taught his followers to lose their lives in order to find their lives (Mark 8:35). His grace or unconditional love demonstrated in this way leads his followers to serve others in sacrifice, which helps them to experience life as God had originally intended (Bonhoeffer, 1937/1995).

Lastly, those who follow Christ pattern their lives after him and his teachings. It may sound strange that Jesus said, "If anyone would come after me, let him ... follow me" (Mark 8:34); however, Jesus's words have a profound simplicity. Some people may want to follow Jesus but only in their way. Yet, Christ calls people to follow him in a particular manner that is his way, and the way of Christ is marked by self-denial, sacrifice, and an emulation of his life, teachings, and character. Discipleship thus means following Jesus's example of loving God and loving others through humility and sacrificial service.

Faith at Work in Following Jesus

Good works are an important theme in the Christian worldview, but there is much confusion about this theme. Christians know salvation is by God's grace through faith and not by their works (Ephesians 2:8–9), yet they may still struggle with trying to merit God's favor through their acts of obedience. However, Paul taught that "in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision [that is, works of obedience to God's Law] counts for anything, but only faith working through love" (Galatians 5:6). Of course, Paul did not teach that works are unimportant in the Christian life, but, rather, he taught that works are not the basis for salvation. It may be helpful to think of this idea in the following way: Works do not lead to salvation; they flow out of salvation. In other words, the good works of the Christian life are an expression of God's salvation that is given by God's grace and received through faith.

This important idea changes the entire complexion of the Christian life. Discipleship is a life of faith, resting in Christ's completed work of salvation on behalf of his followers. In this way, the Christian life is centered on Jesus and his work for Christians; it is not centered on Christians and their works for Jesus. This orientation to life leads to the development of wisdom, because "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom" (Proverbs 9:10a). When Jesus is at the center of one's worldview, a life of humility and self-sacrifice increasingly emerges.

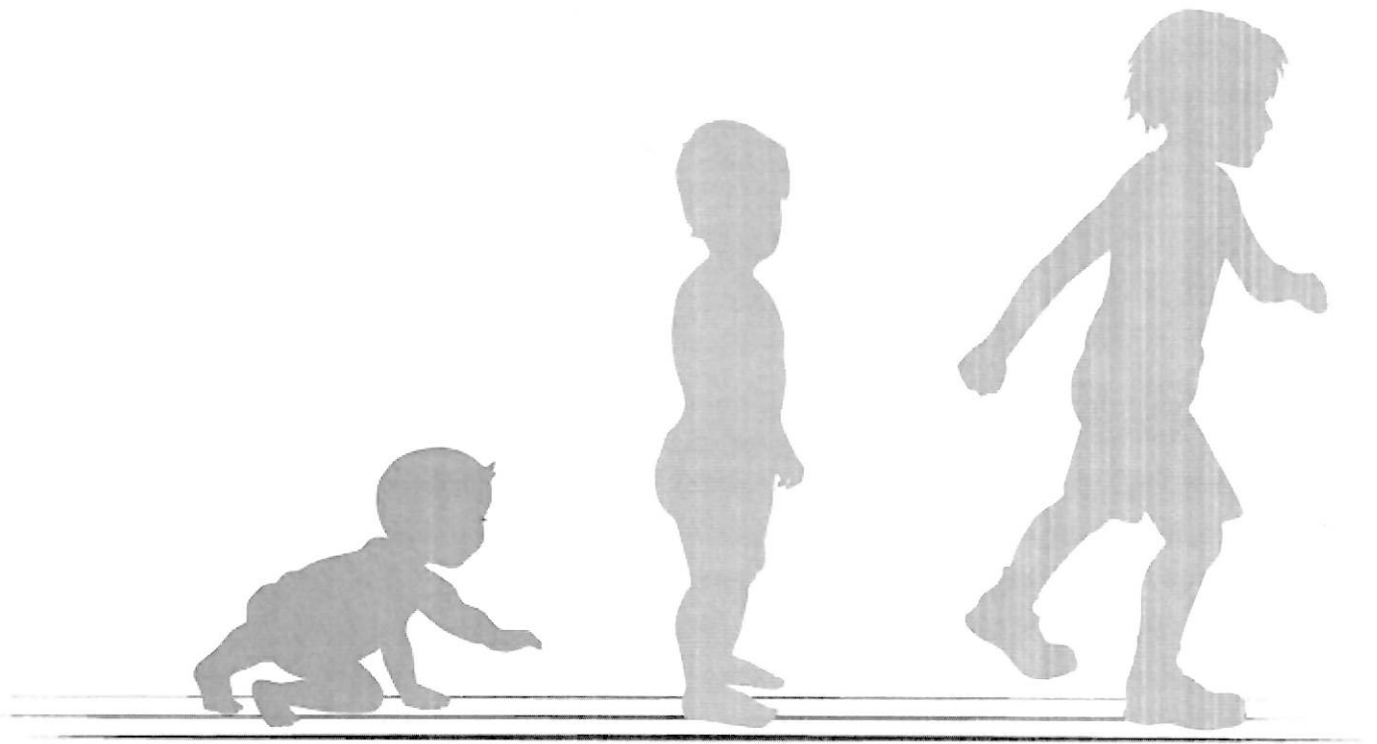
Alternate worldviews tend to place an individual or a community at the center of its worldview systems, and this can lead to a near-sighted view of reality. For instance, a human-centered worldview might try to define wisdom by what make humans happy. This idea may be expressed in popular sayings like: "Whatever makes you happy must be right; whatever harms another person is wrong." Yet, this worldview approach lacks a clear definition of human happiness or human flourishing. It also does not seem to provide an objective reason for loving another person well. A human-centered worldview tends to result in control—control of one's circumstances, control of one's choices, and even control of others' choices. In contrast, the Christ-centered worldview leads to a life of surrender—surrender of one's priorities, surrender of one's agenda, and even surrender of one's life.

Jesus taught that living abundantly comes from laying one's life down for God and others. It says that wisdom is found in God's truth rather than in human beings seeking to determine truth in themselves. If human happiness is one's goal in life, he or she will live life chasing happiness but never quite finding it. If trusting God becomes one's goal, true happiness through the surrender of one's life in love to God and others will be discovered. Jesus communicated this idea when he taught his followers to "seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things [or life's necessities] will be added to you" (Matthew 6:33). Discipleship is the process of following Jesus's way of living, laying one's life down in love for God and others. This pathway of discipleship leads to a life of happiness and to the development of wisdom.

The Humility of Denying Oneself

Discipleship, like salvation, is ultimately God's work. While Christians are called to take an active role in responding to God through faith, God completes his good work in Christians (Philippians 1:6). Hence, Christians must remain in a posture of humility, trusting God to finish what he started in their lives. This is possible by the enabling power of God's Spirit who lives in the followers of Christ and produces his fruit in and through them.

The Work of the Holy Spirit



The Holy Spirit is a member of the Trinity, and he carries out the work of the Father. Peterson (2010) noted, "The Holy Spirit is God's empowering presence, and what he empowers in us is a life of blessing and salvation, a life of resurrection" (p. 202). Specifically, then, the Holy Spirit works within the lives of Christ's disciples to help them reach spiritual maturity. To describe this process vividly, the New Testament uses a person moving from birth through the various stages of life. For example, Jesus said that one enters salvation by being "born again" (John 3:3b). Peter spoke of the early stages of Christian growth in this way: "Like newborn infants, long for the pure spiritual milk, that by it you may grow up into salvation—if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good" (1 Peter 2:2–3). The author of Hebrews challenged Christians to make advances in their spiritual growth by taking in "solid food [which] is for the mature" (Hebrews 5:14a). Scripture thus presents salvation as a new birth and the process of discipleship as growth from spiritual infancy to spiritual maturity.

Another way to refer to the process of growth in the Christian life is **spiritual formation**, which is the work of the Holy Spirit to conform Christians to the image of Christ. For instance, the word *formation* refers to the process of spiritual growth, and the word *spiritual* reminds Christians that this growth is a result of the Spirit's work and not their own. Like clay in the hands of a potter, Christians are formed by the Holy Spirit into "little Christs" (Lewis, 1952, p. 199). Because believers are complete in Christ at the moment of their salvation, the Holy Spirit's work in the Christian's life can be described as "maturing into who I already am" (Lynch, McNicol, & Thrall, 2011, p. 40).

Summary—The Work of the Holy Spirit

What types of work does the Holy Spirit accomplish in the Christian's life? The following is a summary of some key teachings from the New Testament on the work of the Holy Spirit in the Christian life:

- The Holy Spirit lives in Christians, which makes their body a temple of God's Spirit (1 Corinthians 6:19).
- The Holy Spirit comforts, teaches, and reminds Christians of the truth of Jesus's words (John 14:26).

- The Holy Spirit enables Christians to walk in freedom from bondage, reminding them that they are God's children who can cry out to him, "Abba! Father!" (Romans 8:15).
- The Holy Spirit gives words to the prayers of Christians that cannot even be uttered (Romans 8:27).
- The Holy Spirit empowers Christians to experience victory over their sinful natures (Galatians 5:17–18).
- The Holy Spirit seals Christians and assures them of a future experience of the full extent of their salvation in Christ, the resurrection of their bodies (Ephesians 1:13).

In all these ways and more, the Holy Spirit is continually at work in and through the lives of Christians, working to produce his fruit in them.

The Fruit of the Spirit



The **fruit of the Spirit** is basically the evidence of the Spirit's work in and through the lives of Christians. This fruit is listed in Galatians 5:22b–23a as "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, [and] self-control." It is important to notice two key ideas embedded in this idea of the fruit of the Spirit. First, fruit signals that the Spirit's work is gradual. It grows over the span of the Christian life, through all the ebbs and flows of life's journey.

Second, this fruit is produced by the Spirit. The Christian does not generate this fruit in their own strength or wisdom. This idea is crucial to keep in mind because without the Spirit's work, it would be impossible for the Christian to reflect Christ well in practical ways in life. Thus, Christians must trust the Spirit to produce his fruit in and through their lives.

Taking Up One's Cross and Living a New Life

Christians experience the work of the Spirit because they are united with Christ by faith in his death and resurrection. Paul wrote:

For if we have been united with [Jesus] in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. We know that our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin. (Romans 6:5–6)

In these words, Paul pictured Christians as dying with Jesus, being buried with Jesus, and being raised with Jesus. Essentially, then, Christians are united with Jesus when they believe in him for salvation.

The Christian life emphasizes Christ's finished work of salvation as the objective reality on which Christian beliefs and behaviors are formed (Peterson, 2005). The words "Christ's finished work of salvation" mean Jesus accomplished everything necessary for a person to enter a right relationship with God. Through Christ, Christians receive full and free forgiveness for all their past, present, and future sins. Nothing will separate Christians from God's love (Romans 8:31–39). All their sin, failure, shame, and guilt have been overcome by the cross and resurrection of Christ.

Christians can thus rest securely and joyfully in Jesus and his work of salvation. Through this posture of rest, they can actively participate in God's ongoing work of transformation in their lives by the power of his Spirit. They can be assured of God's never-ending love and acceptance in Christ, and they can be confident that God will complete his good work in them (Philippians 1:6). In this way, they can consistently develop a life of wisdom in which Jesus is the center and focus of their spiritual growth process.

Union With Jesus

The idea of how Christians are united with Jesus when they trust him for salvation is presented in Paul's words in 2 Corinthians 5:21, "For our sake [God] made [Jesus] to be sin who knew no sin, so that in [Jesus] we might become the righteousness of God." Christ took the sin of humanity upon himself in his sacrificial death, and in sin's place, he offered humanity his perfect righteousness. As a result, those who trust Christ for salvation have their sins removed and receive Christ's righteousness as a gift. Being cleansed of sin and clothed in the righteousness of Jesus means Christians can rest securely in the benefits of salvation. Some of these benefits include being:

- Adopted into God's family (Romans 8:15),
- God's beloved children (Colossians 3:12), and
- Free from condemnation (Romans 8:1).

When a person receives God's salvation and is united with Christ, all that is true of Jesus and his relationship to his Father is now true of them. Packer (1973) summarized this idea well when he wrote that

God receives us as [children], and loves us with the same steadfast affection with which he eternally loves his beloved only-begotten. There are no distinctions of affection in the divine family. We are all loved just as fully as Jesus is loved. (p. 216)

A New Character

Living in union with Jesus means Christians are growing in their character throughout the process of discipleship.

Character formation is God's work in Christians to develop godly, holy, and righteous virtues in their lives. There is some overlap between the ideas of spiritual formation and character formation; however, character formation distinctly refers to the virtues of life as both a one-time reality and an ongoing reality for the Christian.

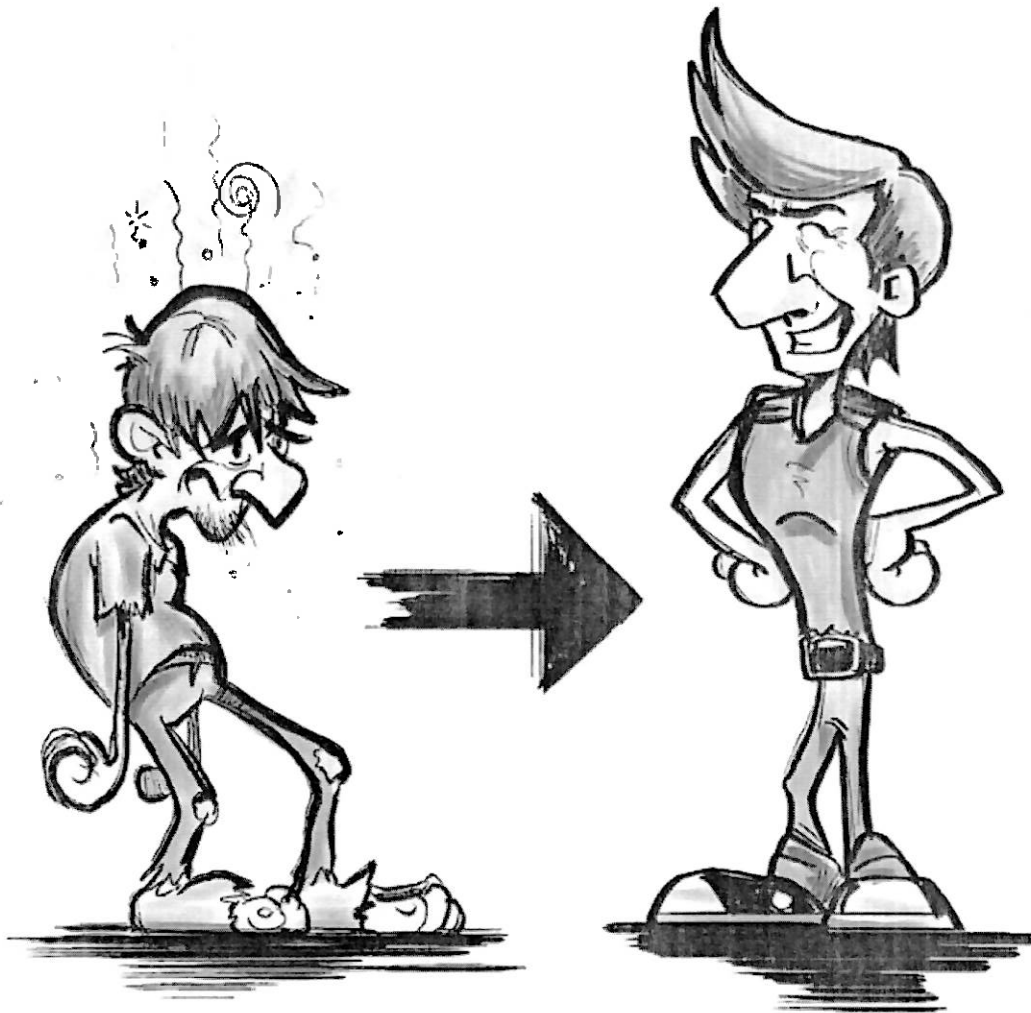
In relation to the one-time reality, Christians are fully infused with Christ's righteous character the moment they trust in him for salvation. In God's eyes, those who trust in Christ die to sin when they receive Christ's death for sin on their behalf. At that moment and for all future time, those who trust in Christ are righteous in God's sight because of their union with Christ. In relation to the ongoing reality, Christians grow in virtue as God's Spirit works in their lives. They are gradually conformed to the image of Christ in practical ways throughout their journey in life. The ideas of a one-time reality and an ongoing reality in character formation mean that Christians are righteous in their union with Christ, while they are also becoming righteous as they live out their daily devotion to Christ by the power of God's Spirit. The idea of ongoing practical growth in character formation can be seen in Paul's teachings in Ephesians 4:20–24.

Already and Not Yet Applied: Hebrews 10

Earlier in the textbook, God's reign in the hearts of his people was described as already inaugurated in the life, death, burial, and resurrection of Christ but not fully completed. While Christians experience God's reign in their lives in significant ways now, they are still in the process of growth and will one day experience the full extent of God's salvation in the future. Although this idea surfaces in various ways throughout the New Testament, there is a beautiful expression of it in Hebrews 10: "[Christians] have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all" (Hebrews 10:10a). The word sanctified means to be set apart to God as holy. Here, the New Testament teaches the one-time reality of how Christians are righteous before God when they trust in Christ. Then, a few verses later, Hebrews 10:14 states, "by a single offering [Christ] has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified." Here, the New Testament teaches the ongoing reality of growing in sanctification or in being set apart to God as holy. In these ways, Christians understand that they are holy before God because of their union with Christ, and they also understand that they are growing in holiness before God in their daily lives with Christ.

Joining the ideas of a one-time reality and an ongoing reality of character formation is transformational for one's understanding of the Christian life. Christians do not need to try to maintain their righteous standing before God through their daily efforts to follow Christ. Their standing before God is secure because it rests on Christ's perfect and finished work on their behalf; however, this does not mean that Christians do not actively participate in the ongoing character formation process. Rather, the followers of Christ can plunge into their spiritual growth journey with the assurance that they are already fully accepted by God in Christ, and all God's work to develop virtue in their lives flows out of his settled love for them in Christ.

Old Self, New Self



In Ephesians 4:20–24, Paul taught Christians about the ongoing reality of their character formation process. The context for Paul's teaching is the new standing Christians have before God because of their union with Christ, and the content of his teaching is a two-pronged call to Christians. The first prong calls the followers of Christ "to put off [the] old self" (Ephesians 4:22a), and the second prong calls them "to put on the new self" (Ephesians 4:24). Both of these aspects of a Christian's ongoing growth in the character formation process are essential.

Taking Off the Old Self

Paul begins his teaching with a call to Christians "to put off [their] old self" (Ephesians 4:22a). The old self is the lives Christians lived before placing their faith in Christ for salvation. It is important to understand, however, that the power needed to move away from a Christian's former pattern of life does not come from their own resolve and strength; this power comes from the work of God's Spirit and is God's gracious gift. Although Christians are actively involved in the process, this work is only possible because of Christ's finished work of salvation on behalf of Christians and because of God's Spirit producing his fruit in their lives. God has already made believers into new creations when they trusted in Christ (2 Corinthians 5:17), and, because this is true, Christians are called to live out this reality in their daily lives by God's power.

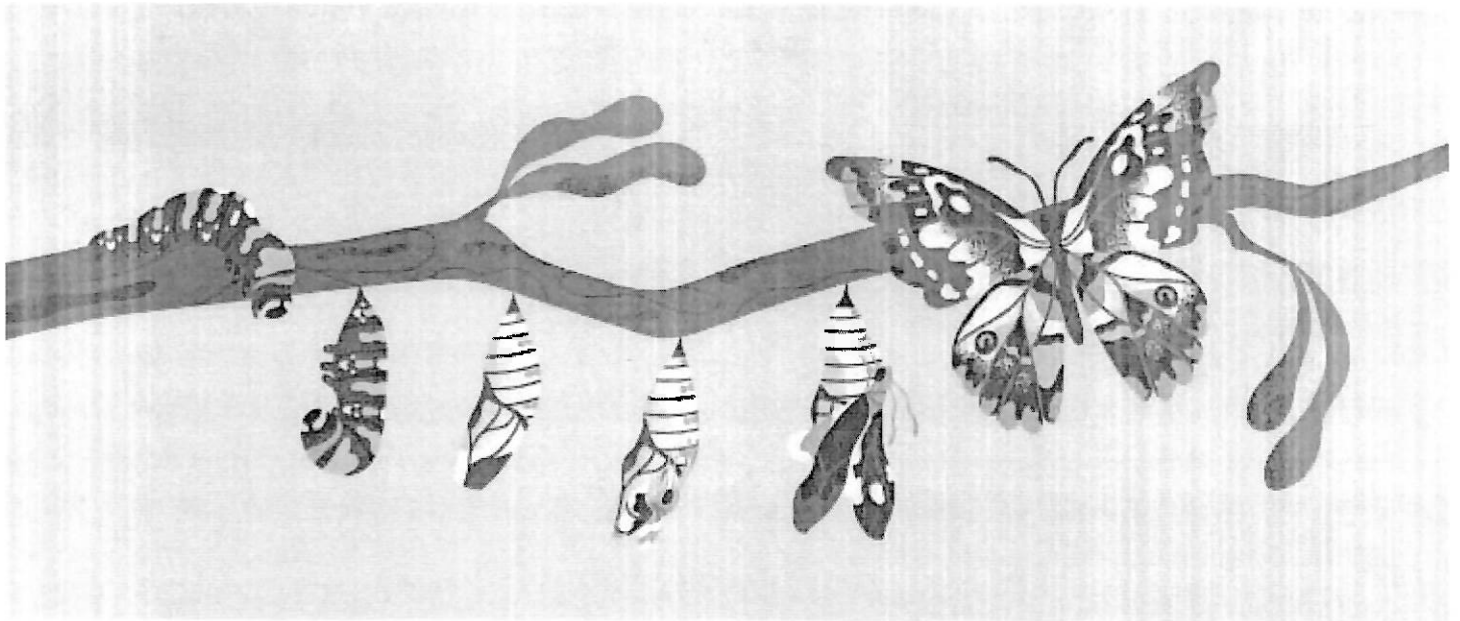
The movement away from the old patterns of life before trusting in Christ is gradual. It is like removing the layers of an onion. It takes place one step at a time, and it often brings tears to one's eyes. The old way of living has brought with it a great deal of shame, pain, fear, and failure, and the followers of Jesus must face these painful aspects of their former lives. However, this process is not meant to bring Christians back into their past and leave them there. Rather, all these pains are now faced in a secure relationship of love with Christ. The guilt and shame of the past will doubtlessly erupt in the hearts and minds of Christians, yet they can rest assured in the present reality of God's unconditional love for them in Christ. They can know the life-transforming and liberating truth of God's forgiveness for all their past, present, and future sins.

Putting On the New

Paul provides a complement for the idea of Christians putting off their old way of life. This is the complementary idea of putting on the new self or the new way of life in Christ. It is like removing an old, stained shirt for a clean shirt. This new life in Christ is described as "created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness" (Ephesians 4:24b). Again, Christians must remember they are new creations in Christ (2 Corinthians 5:17). They are united with Christ who has taken their sin and given them his righteousness.

As with the removal of the old life, Christians are called to be active in the process of putting on their new life, but the reality and power of this new life in Christ is God's gracious gift and work within them. Thus, making changes in life does not make Christians holy; instead, they are expressions of the holiness God has already accomplished for them in Christ. This leads Christians to a deeper understanding of their new identity in Jesus.

Identity



Really, all of Paul's teachings in Ephesians 4:20–24 can be summarized in one word, namely, *identity*. **Identity** is the true nature of a person. For Christians, their identity is connected to Christ and their new standing before God and the new life they receive in Jesus (for a more detailed discussion of these themes, review the "Belonging to Jesus by Faith Alone" section in Chapter 6). Thus, Christians are already made new in Christ. All their growth is based in their new identity in Christ, and this identity is firmly established and will never change. Christians are united with Jesus forever because of his finished work of salvation for them and not because of their attempts to work for him. The spiritual DNA of Christians is the new life Christ has given them. Even when they do not reflect the likeness of Christ well in their practical lives, this does not change their standing before God.

For instance, the DNA inside a caterpillar is a butterfly. Although a caterpillar does not look like a butterfly at points in its life, this does not change its DNA on the inside. In time, growth will result in the caterpillar being transformed in such a way that its outside will be an expression of its inside. Similarly, Christians have already been transformed on the inside when they placed their faith in Christ, and God will work in their lives so they will gradually reflect outwardly what is already true of their inward spiritual reality in Christ.

Developing Wisdom, Faith, and Love



The Sermon on the Mount, by Carl Bloch, 1877. The Museum of National History, Hillerød, Denmark.

One of the ways God works to conform Christians into the image of Christ is to enable them to follow Jesus's teachings and his example. While no Christian can do this with flawless consistency, they can still grow in these ways by the power of God's Spirit. Jesus's Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5–7 is the classic expression of Christ's ethical teachings for his followers. Among other points, Jesus emphasized how radical love, authentic **prayer**, and wise foundations are important aspects of following his teachings and example.

Radical Love

Following Jesus means living a life of radical love for both God and others. Jesus summarized the greatest commandments in all God's Law as loving God and loving others (Matthew 22:38–39). Christ expressed this idea in his Sermon on the Mount by elaborating on the spirit of some Old Testament laws. In Matthew 5:17–48, Jesus said he came to fulfill God's law and expanded on the spirit of God's laws on murder, adultery, retaliation, and love. In these ways, Christ painted a powerful portrait of radical love for his followers.

For instance, in relation to the Old Testament law on murder, Jesus focused on the root cause of murder, that is, the attitude of anger. Even though anger is internal, it can lead to hatred and eventually to the outward action of murder (Matthew 5:21–26). Similarly, in relation to God's law on adultery, Christ focused on the root cause of adultery, which

is lust. Lust, using another person for one's selfish pleasure, is the opposite of love, and it can lead to the physical violation of one's faithfulness in marriage (Matthew 5:27–30).

Also, in relation to the issue of retaliation, Christ's teaching on radical love is accentuated further. Jesus taught his followers that "If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also" (Matthew 5:39). This means Christians are called to love even in the face of hatred. Paul echoed similar teachings in Romans 12:17–18 when he wrote, "Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all." Finally, Jesus's teaching on loving one's enemies in Matthew 5:43–48 is related to his previous teaching but is even more radical in nature. Christ called his followers to reflect the love of his Father in their lives, and because God demonstrated his love for even his rebellious creation (Romans 5:8), Christians are to love their enemies as well. Of course, Jesus not only taught about love in this way, he also demonstrated it. While being crucified, for instance, Jesus prayed for those who were taking his life unjustly: "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34). Thus, in both his teachings and example, Jesus called his followers to live a life of radical love.

Living Out the Truths of the Gospel

When Christians reflect on living according to Christ's teachings and perfect example, they can become overwhelmed, realizing their inadequacy to accomplish this. So, it is imperative for Christ's followers to remember the truths of the gospel and the power of God's Spirit. These ideas are embedded in Jesus's teachings, for example, about Christians loving their enemies. The love the followers of Christ share with their enemies was first demonstrated to them by God. Thus, loving one's enemies does not flow from a Christian's human resolve but from an experience of God's love by the power of God's Spirit. John conveyed this same point. After describing God's love as demonstrated in the sacrifice of Christ, he wrote, "Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another" (1 John 4:11). The important, life-transforming point here is that all God's commands flow out of what he has accomplished for Christians. Christ's followers can hear his teachings and reflect on his example, but they must remember that they need the enabling power of God's Spirit living within them to obey Jesus. This is the spiritual reality they encountered when they first heard the good news of God's salvation, and it is the good news they continue to remember and rely upon each day in their Christian lives.

The reality of experiencing a transformation of the heart by the power of God's Spirit was promised long ago in the Old Testament. For instance, in Ezekiel 36:26–27, God said to his people,

I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules.

An important point to focus on here is that God is the one who transforms his people by the power of his Spirit. He gives them both the desire and the power to obey him, and this is what Christ fulfilled in his life, death, burial, and resurrection for those who trust in him. While Christians are called to participate actively in

God's work of ongoing transformation, Paul taught believers in Christ to "work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure" (Philippians 2:12b–13). Paul's emphasis is not that Christians are to work for their salvation because salvation is by God's grace and not human works (Ephesians 2:8–9). Rather, his emphasis is that Christians are called to participate by the Spirit's power in living out what God has already accomplished for them in Christ. The truths of the gospel remind Christians that God has given them a new heart in Christ, and he has filled them with the power of his Spirit to grow in living out his commands in their daily lives.

Authentic Prayer

In addition to teaching his disciples about radical love, Jesus also taught and modeled for his disciples a life of prayerfulness. Following Jesus, then, "consists of things to do and ways to think; however, if there is no prayer at the center nothing lives. Prayer is the heart that pumps blood into all the words and acts" (Peterson, 2008, p. 167). Prayer is a form of communication between God and humanity, and the Christian worldview holds that God hears and answers prayers.

In Jesus's teachings, he called his followers to engage in authentic prayer, focusing on God and not impressing others (Matthew 6:5–15). In fact, to stress this point, Jesus told his followers to "go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you" (Matthew 6:6). It is important to note that Christ does not forbid all public prayer. For example, Jesus prayed both in public (Matthew 15:36), and he also prayed in seclusion (Mark 1:35). However, his teaching here does underscore the importance of making God's glory and will the focus of prayer.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus gave his disciples a model prayer in Matthew 6:9–13 that is sometimes called the Lord's Prayer. It has been suggested that this prayer is central to the Sermon on the Mount in various ways (Guelich, 1982), but perhaps one of the most significant aspects of Matthew 6:9–13 is its opening address to God as "Our Father." These words imply that Jesus's followers offer prayer along with him, calling God their Father together. Again, these words indicate that Christians have experienced God's love that has brought them into his family, and as a result of this, they express their love to God in worshipful devotion as well as their love to others.

It should be noted that while the model prayer in Matthew 6:9–13 is a helpful guide to prayer, Christians can express their hearts to God in prayer in their own words as well. For instance, one of the longest prayers Jesus prayed is recorded in John 17. Thus, both by his teaching and his example, Jesus called his followers to a life of authentic prayerfulness.

Wise Foundations



Jesus concluded his Sermon on the Mount with images of how people must make decisions in life in relation to him (Matthew 7:13–27), and his final image is particularly instructive. Specifically, Jesus described wise and foolish builders in Matthew 7:24–27. The focus of Christ's teachings in this passage centers on what is similar and different for the two builders. First, both builders similarly hear Jesus's teachings and encounter life's challenges. Second, the difference between the two builders is that the wise builder obeys Christ's teachings, but the foolish builder does not obey Jesus. While the Christian worldview says that Jesus is the only sure foundation for life, it also says that people must make a personal decision about embracing Christ in obedience. Relying on Christ does not mean Christians are exempt from life's challenges, but it does mean that Christ will sustain his followers through all of life's struggles.

The core beliefs of a person's worldview provide the foundation for his or her life. Everyone forms his or her beliefs based on his or her worldview commitments just like buildings rest on foundations. A building is not sustained merely by its structure or design but by the strength of its foundation. For Christians, Christ is their foundation, and by God's grace and the power of his Spirit, they seek to embrace Jesus's teachings and follow his example each day of their lives. This commitment is rooted in God's love, which fuels their desire to live in complete devotion to him. Chapell (2001) wrote, "As the assurance of God's love allows us to cease striving to please him for our own benefit, our good works will begin reflecting more of the selfless righteousness that is truly holy" (p. 11). Just as God's works flow out of

his love, the Christian's works flow out of their love for God, which is itself a response to God's love. John summed up this point concisely when he wrote, "We love because [God] first loved us" (1 John 4:19). The wise foundation of the Christian life is based on and motivated by God's love in Christ.

Conclusion

Following Jesus leads to the development of wisdom in life. Faith in Christ expresses itself in a complete love for God and for others. Every person needs wisdom, and each person must decide if he or she will trust in Christ as his or her foundation. From life-altering choices to daily choices, a person's worldview shapes his or her beliefs and behaviors, and it has major and lasting impacts on every aspect of life. For the Christian worldview, God has provided the opportunity for people to be restored to a right relationship with him through Christ. Those who trust in Jesus rest in a secure relationship of love with God, which leads to a daily transformation of their lives as they seek to follow Christ by the enabling power of God's Spirit.

Chapter Review

Main Ideas

- Developing wisdom in the Christian life occurs throughout the process of discipleship, which is a personal relationship with Christ patterned after his teachings and example.
- The Holy Spirit lives in Christians, and he empowers them to embrace Christ and to be conformed to the image of Christ.
- Christians seek to live out daily the reality of God's salvation that has been freely and fully given to them in Christ.
- The Christian life expresses itself in radical love and authentic prayer based upon the foundation of Christ and a response to him in faith by God's grace and his Spirit's power.

Key Terms

- **Character Formation:** God works in a Christian's life to develop godly, holy, and righteous virtues.
- **Fruit of the Spirit:** The list of characteristics or attributes of the Holy Spirit's work in a Christian's life, found in Galatians 5:22–23—love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control; the sense of the term refers both to the gradual, hidden work of the Holy Spirit to form Christian character and to the evidence of that work.
- **Identity:** The true nature of a person; for the Christian, identity is connected to one's union with Christ, which means they are a new creation in Jesus.
- **Prayer:** A form of communication between God and humanity, and Jesus taught that God is the focus of prayer. The Christian worldview teaches that God hears and answers prayers.
- **Spiritual Formation:** A vibrant, Holy Spirit-led transformation of every Christian into the likeness of Jesus in thought, word, heart, and behavior; ongoing expression of the direct connection between salvation received from Jesus and the sanctifying relationship shared with Jesus as the Christian grows and matures in life.

Application of Knowledge

- You can use the information in this chapter to begin, renew, or assess your spiritual life. Taking practical steps to put off the old self and then put on the new self can become ways to revitalize your faith commitments.
- This chapter can be used to help you to better understand the Christian life and its growth process. It can encourage a Christian to rest daily in God's love and to live devoted to him by the enabling power of God's Spirit based on the truths of the gospel.

Questions for Reflection

- From what foundation do you draw wisdom? After reading this chapter, how does the explanation of the Christian life here compare or contrast to your pursuit of wisdom?
- Do you agree or disagree with the idea in this chapter that God works in people's lives and humanity is called to respond to this work by faith? Why or why not?
- After reviewing the fruit of the Spirit found in Galatians 5:22–23, what have you observed about people who have these characteristics evident in their lives?
- What do you think about the claim that Christians are already holy in Christ the moment they trust in him for salvation?
- From your worldview perspective, how can you incorporate the principles of Jesus's teachings in the Sermon on the Mount in your life experiences and social interactions?

Resources for Further Reading

- Chapell, B. (2001). *Holiness by grace: Living in the joy that is our strength*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books.
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GLOSSARY

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES