



NURTURING FAITH

Firming Up the Foundations

Text: Matthew 7:24-27; 1 Corinthians 3:10-15

Theme: The key word in the nurturing stage is foundation. The one sure foundation of Jesus Christ it consists of core practices (T), core beliefs (E), and core group (P).

Introduction:

The one question which dominates my thinking; the one question which is the focus of the rest of my professional ministry; the one question which I want to be able to have an answer, "How can I grow into becoming a fully devoted follower of Christ here at Christ Church?" When someone asks that question to me, I want to be able to have confident response. If we are to be a disciple-making church, this seems to me to be something we would want to have thought out. Frankly, it is a question that has haunted me for some time, because I was not satisfied with the answer we had to give. By the way you have permission to ask me the question, "How can I grow into becoming a fully devoted follower of Christ here at Christ Church?" I would be thrilled to know that this was your heart's desire.

What excites me about this juncture of our life together at Christ Church is that a clearer picture of this "how to" seems to be emerging. We might even be on to an answer to the question of how we grow toward maturity in Christ or simply Christlikeness. This is what we would call our pathway of discipleship that leads to toward a most important destination. Pastor Meyer began our Lenten series last week with this statement: "The greatest goal in life is to grow more like Jesus." We are calling this The Intentional Journey. Like any journey with a destination there are markers along the way that tell us how we are progressing toward the ultimate goal.

Last Sunday, Pastor Meyer got us started by introducing the first step of discovering. This is the *awakening* stage. This is the place where it is first dawning on us that we are not the center of the universe but there is Something or Someone Bigger that fills the world. We might even be able to know this One who is a personal God who wants to know us and be known by us.

We were introduced last Sunday to the person of Zacchaeus, the little man with the collaborator's heart. This tax collector lash turn coat had sold his soul to Rome while extorting exorbitant amounts of money from his own people. When the rumors started to swirl that Jesus was coming through Jericho, Zacchaeus sought a good view of the celebrity Jesus by climbing a tree. What motivated him to want to catch a glimpse of this grace-filled healer? My guess is that Zacchaeus had come to hate his own life. The money wasn't doing it



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anymore. He was isolated from his own people. He has long since lost any moral high ground. He was scum not only in the people's eyes but also his own.

But for Zacchaeus to move from the discovery stage he would have to take a big step. He would have to move out of the crowd into a relationship with Jesus.

There is a helpful progression toward Jesus of which John Ortberg, the teaching pastor at the Menlo Park Presbyterian Church in Northern California, speaks. (I am indebted to him for a number of concepts this morning.)

He says that we first start out as *strangers* to Jesus. He is at best a distant figure who plays no more part in our life than George Washington might.

But if we are take a next step we can move to be *admirers* of Jesus. He is held in high regard by us. He is the moral standard bearer by which all ethics are measured. He is a religious genius whose teaching have stood the test of time. He lived the most loving life by embracing those at the bottom of the barrel. He even lived the most sacrificial life by willingly submitting to the most excruciating death imaginable. Imagine someone saying to their enemies they pegging you to a tree, "Father forgive them for they know not what they do".

But does admiring Jesus make you a *follower*? When Zacchaeus positioned himself in the tree, he was simply an admirer. He was an observer blending into the crowd. His intention was to simply be lost in the electricity of the mob as this miracle-working rabbi and his entourage passed through town.

But that day, Jesus forced his hand. Jesus stopped and named him. "**Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today.**" (Luke 19:5) Zacchaeus, it is said came down at once and welcomed him gladly. At this point Zacchaeus passed from being an **admirer** to being a **follower** by his acts of repentance.

To become a follower of Jesus means to lose the anonymity of being a part of a crowd. To come to worship requires little of us. We can be positively inclined, or negatively inclined, but we don't have to declare ourselves. In fact in worship, we can come with a spectators' attitude where we feel it is our job to simply evaluate the performance. How did the choir do today? Did I like the musical selections? Did the pastor have anything to say to me today? We might as well be writing a review for the local paper.



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But this day, the anonymity of Zacchaeus was exposed. He crossed the line from admirer to follower. He said, "Look, Lord! Here and now I give half my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount" (Luke 19:8). That must have been quite an accounting task! Zacchaeus was cut to the heart by the presence of this righteous man. And yet so powerful was the draw to Jesus, that giving up his ill gotten wealth was worth it all to follow him.

In our day, I would say that we have added another category that keeps us from being a follower of Jesus. We can be *users* of Jesus. We can teach Jesus as the one who has come to bless our lives if we follow Him. The carrot that is held out before us is that Jesus has come to offer his favored children all the blessings of position, power and wealth here and now if we take him into our life. The image that comes to my mind is that of a motorcycle with side car. Jesus is invited along for the ride. We have Jesus in the side car to be consulted and have him bless our undertakings.

There should be a hard line between being a *stranger, admirer or user* of Jesus, if we are to be a *follower*. If Christlikeness is the goal, then submission is the necessary step to get on the journey. There is no formation in Jesus, without submission to Jesus. Being a follower of Jesus leaves no doubt as to who is deploying the formative influence.

When Michael Phelps won 8 gold medals at last summer's Olympic Games, there were a few young people whose hearts were pounding, who felt the rush of energy through their bodies, because they said to themselves, I am going to be the next Michael Phelps. I am going to break that unbreakable record. They were not simply admirers of Michael Phelps, they became followers. I am an admirer. I have not been in a swimming pool since last summer. But a few years from now we will hear the stories of those who stand on the podium with a gold medal around their neck and they will say, it all started for me when I saw the elation on Michael Phelps' face. They will barely have gotten out of pool between now and then.

When are you on the journey? Stranger—just getting to become aware of who this Jesus is; Admirer—hold Jesus in high regard; User—I love having my Jesus in my life—and treat him sort of like a rabbit's foot. Or have we crossed the line to follower? When we become followers we have entered the nurturing stage of faith.



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Once we have we have entered the nurturing stage, there is one word that marks this stage: **Foundation**. This is where we lay the foundation of our faith. We find the place to stand. At the close of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus sums up his teaching with these words, "Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into to practice is like the wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against the house; yet it did not fall, because it had its **foundation on the rock**" (Matthew 7:24-25). The rock is a common image used for God throughout the Old Testament. In a Psalm of David we read, "I love you, Lord, my strength. The Lord is my rock, my fortress and my deliverer; my God is my rock, in whom I take refuge, my shield and my horn of my salvation, my stronghold" (Psalm 18:1-2) The rock is that immovable foundation on which we build our lives. The apostle Paul identifies the unshakeable foundation with Jesus Christ himself. "For no one can lay any **foundation** other that the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ" (I Cor. 3:11). He then goes on to say that what is all important is what we build on that foundation. Will it be with material that will last forever and stand the ultimate fire and will it be wood, hay or straw that will be burned up in the last day.

As we look as this nurturing stage of faith, the question is, of what does the foundation consist? How do we build a solid foundation? Jesus Christ is the foundation. Yet we might say within that foundation of Jesus there are three elements that make up the ingredients of the solid rock.

- Core Beliefs
- Core Practices
- Core Group

Core Beliefs

It is at this stage that we need to get our core beliefs in place. What do we mean by core beliefs? Let me borrow a scheme from Michael Novak, where he distinguishes between three kinds of beliefs or convictions.

- Public Beliefs
- Private Beliefs
- Core Beliefs

Public Beliefs



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Public beliefs are those convictions that *we want other people to think we believe*, even though we may not really believe them. For example, my wife puts on a dress and asks, "Does this dress make me look fat?" The correct answer is, "Nothing you ever wear makes you look fat." Public figures are notorious for uttering public beliefs because they sound good. The biblical illustration here is King Herod. After Jesus was born, some visitors from the East, we call wise men, told him about the one who was born King of the Jews. He told the wise men, "Go and make careful search for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him" (Matt. 2:8). Did King Herod have any intent to worship this child? No, of course not. It made for good public consumption because it would get him what he wanted. In our business life there may be things we know are the politically correct things to say we believe if we want to be a good company person. But inside we know that we don't believe them.

Private Beliefs

Private beliefs are those things *we actually think we believe until they are tested*. For example, the apostle Peter on the night before Jesus was crucified stated his undying allegiance to Jesus. In response to Jesus saying that before the cock would crow three times, Peter would have denied him, Peter said, "Even if all fall away, I will not...Even if I have to die with you, I will never disown you" (Mark 14: 29, 31).

When Peter said these words, was he sincere in that moment? Did he actually think he believed what he was saying? Yes, I think he did believe. Were these Peter's true convictions? No. When the time came to stand up as loyal follower of Jesus, he acted like he never knew Jesus. Our private beliefs can be fickle, and perhaps we never truly know if we believe them until they are tested.

I can say in life or in death, my sure and certain confidence is in Jesus Christ. Nothing can move me off of that foundation. Then I got sick with prostate cancer and had to really look inside myself to see if my sure and certain hope was in Jesus Christ in this life and beyond.

Core Beliefs

Our core beliefs are *the convictions that are revealed in our daily action, based upon what we actually do*. These are the mental maps we follow. I will always act out of my core beliefs or convictions. I can never violate them. I believe in gravity. I can never violate that belief. I will always act with that



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knowledge in mind. Gravity is part of my mental map. If I want to stay safe, I will not walk to the edge of a 100 story building; but I want to take my life, I might do so. My actions are always the result of my purposes or core convictions.

So my public convictions are what I say I believe; my private convictions are what I think I believe; but my core convictions are revealed by what I do. What I say I believe may be bogus; what I think I believe may be fickle; but I will never violate the ways things are.

The core of the core beliefs at this foundational stage of nurture comes back to something very simple and central. There are two questions we must answer: *Who is Jesus Christ? Do I trust him with my life?*

Everything about the life of discipleship comes back to the identity of Jesus. If we believe that Jesus is actually God is human flesh, then we have answered a whole host of questions. Is there a God? Yes, look at Jesus. What is this God like? Look at Jesus. Can I know him? Yes, look to Jesus. That is why he came. He said, *"Come to me and follow me."*

But the next question is—can I trust him with my life? Is Jesus worthy of my trust? Is Jesus good to the core and how I can know? In the cross of Jesus Christ God planted a stake in the ground. Some time ago I was wrestling with this question of how can I know whether this God of mine is good and can be trusted. All of a sudden, I had an image in my mind that came out of the blue but was so graphic that I was thunderstruck. I saw a visual of a massive hand clutching a cross being slammed into the earth. *"But God demonstrates his love for us in while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8).*

Who is Jesus? Can he be trusted? These are the beliefs that are core to the nurturing stage. Do we believe them? Jesus says, the rains will come and beat against the house. Only then will we truly know if these are fickle private convictions or core.

Core Practices

At this nurturing stage of faith we need to start building into the daily structure of our life, those practices that allow us to listen deeply to the truth of God's word in our life. Jesus said, *"Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and put them into practice is like the wise man who builds his house upon the rock" (Matthew 7:24).* We call these core practices *spiritual disciplines*.



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Spiritual disciplines are the training regimen of the Christian life. If you have played sports you know that the repetitious drills in practice are vital to the way you perform in the actual heat of the game. Michael Jordan was a great basketball player, not simply because of his natural talent, but because he worked harder than anyone else. He practiced thousands of foul shots, and stayed after the scheduled practices making sure he got his footwork down. When the game was on the line, he had practiced that moment *ad nauseum* so that he could do it under pressure.

Spiritual disciplines do not connect us to God, they simply put us into God's presence on a regular basis so that we are ready when God shows up. I like Dallas Willard's short saying, "*Grace is opposed to earning, but it is not opposed to effort.*" If we want to nurture a relationship with God, we will need to carve out time and effort.

I remember as if it were yesterday when I first started to incorporate some daily discipline in my life in order to meet God. It was my Junior year at UCLA. I had claimed to be a follower of Jesus, but my biblical knowledge was seriously lacking. I had never read the bible consistently. I was tired of going to bible study groups where someone said, "**Turn to II Hesitations.**" Sounds good to me. Please turn to the prophet Obadiah. How many of us have had moments when we caught a quick glance out of the corner of our eye to see if the person next to us is turning to the first half or the back of the Bible as they looked for Obadiah. So I carved out 20 minutes first thing in the morning to simply start reading through the Bible. I needed to start just getting to know the territory here. I have vivid recollections of reading through the letters of Paul: Romans, I and II Corinthians, Galatians. When I got to Galatians I said to myself, "**I have read something like this before. This is starting to sound familiar.**" I leafed back to Romans and recognized that the issue of justification by faith alone was prominent in both Romans and Galatians. Eureka! I was making connections here.

For some of us that may be where we are. We all have to start somewhere. We add into the disciplines of prayer. We might start with prayer with training wheels on. I have found the acronym ACTS a helpful place to start. The parts of prayer are: Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving and Supplication. It serves as a nice guide to follow to begin to order your thoughts. I have journal full of ACTS as the place where I started to structure my prayer. Add to this Scripture memory, and regular connection of worship, etc.



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The disciplines start to cut grooves into the hardened soil of our hearts so that the seeds of God's word can sink in.

Core Group

We need a place to belong. We people to travel with on this intentional journey. We were made for relationship as people in the image and likeness of God. Just as the Trinitarian God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is the original loving community so we copy him by being placed in a family of God's recreation called the church. This core group is a core value to us if you haven't picked that up. You simply can't go it alone. We must come out of the crowd and enter into relationships with other believers as we help each other along the way.

This is such a repeatedly theme in our church that I am not going to dwell on it this morning. Just to say, if you haven't made the step into community we are just waiting to embrace you and welcome you with us on the journey. Please make that desire known at our welcome center and we will make sure that you get connected.

Let me put the foundational elements of the nurturing stage into our **STEP** rubric. With each stage that there is a next step you can take to move you toward the destination of Christlikeness.

S: Sight: what is your home stage?

T: Training: the disciplines consistent with this stage: Core Practices

E: Equipping, the equipping courses and resources: Core Beliefs

P: Partners: those with whom you are traveling: Core Group

Let me conclude with another question: What happens to a life if we do not lay solid foundations as the nurturing stage? Jesus gives us the answer, **"But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against the house, and it fell with a great crash" (Matthew 7:26-27).**

Jesus says that we can count on the harsh side of life rising up and raging against. It is not a matter of if, but when. The question is, upon what is the house of our life built, rock or sand. If we have not laid in the core beliefs around who is Jesus and settled that is trustworthy; if we have not grooved in the spiritual disciplines that provide structure to our soul; if we do not have the safety net of a caring community, how great the crash will be!



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But if we pay careful attention to clarify our core beliefs, developing core practices, and living in a core group, our lives will hold when it gets tough.

This was the testimony of E. Stanley Jones, the celebrated Methodist missionary to India, in the first half of the 1900's. As an aged man he had a debilitating stroke that left him immobile and virtually speechless. At the time of his stroke, he was able to reflect on how he handled it. "Fortunately, with me, surrender to Jesus was the primary thing, and when the outer strands were cut by the stroke, my life didn't shake...I need no outer props to hold up my faith for my faith holds me."

We begin to build this kind of faith at the nurturing stage.