

Basic Christianity
From An Urban Perspective Unit 2
Week 1: Spiritual Growth

Principles of Spiritual Growth

Do you want to grow spiritually? Some people are afraid of what God might turn them into. How is God going to change you? A caterpillar becomes a butterfly. An acorn becomes an oak tree. A prince becomes a king. What does a Christian become?

(2 Corinthians 5:17) “Those who become Christians become new persons. They are not the same anymore, for the old life is gone. A new life has begun!”

If you want to grow, you first need to learn who you have *become* in Christ. Theologians call this your “*new identity*.” Now that you are a Christian who are you?

Your new identity in Christ

- **You have been *adopted* as God's children.**

(Ephesians 1:5) His unchanging plan has always been to adopt us into his own family by bringing us to himself through Jesus Christ.

- **You are a *new creation* (2 Corinthians 5:17).**
- **God fully *accepts* you as you are (2 Corinthians 5:21; Ephesians 1:7).**
- **You can overcome *sin* in your life.**

(Romans 6:7, 8) For when we died with Christ we were set free from the power of sin. 8 And since we died with Christ, we know we will also share his new life.

See also **Colossians 2:11, 12; Ephesians 2:1-7.**

- **You have been saved from the *power* of the world.**

(Ephesians 2:2, 3) You used to live just like the rest of the world, full of sin, obeying Satan, the mighty prince of the power of the air. He is the spirit at work in the hearts of those who refuse to obey God. 3 All of us used to live that way, following the passions and desires of our evil nature. We were born with an evil nature, and we were under God's anger just like everyone else.

- **You are a *member* of Christ's body, the church (John 17:21-23; I Corinthians 12:27)**
- **God has reserved a *home* in heaven for you (1 Peter 1:3,4; Ephesians 1:11,14; Romans 8:16)**
- **God has given you a *role* in God's plan (Ephesians 2:10)**

Position and Condition

The list above describes what God says is true about us. But we don't always feel that way or live that way. Our condition, the way we live from day to day, is often very different than our new identity. We need to make a distinction between what God says is true of us and what we experience in our lives. This distinction is called our position and condition.

- **Position: Who I am as a Christian, my new identity.**

“For we are God's masterpiece. He has created us anew in Christ Jesus, so that we can do the good things he planned for us long ago.” – Ephesians 2:10

- **Condition: You are a work in progress. God is changing you, but he isn't finished yet.**

“And I am sure that God, who began the good work within you, will continue his work until it is finally finished on that day when Christ Jesus comes back again.” – Philippians 1:6

Applying our new identity (affecting our condition)

Now that we are in Christ, he has forgiven us and adopted us as his children. Our identity has permanently changed. But we don't always feel that way. As Christians, we find ourselves falling into many of the same habits, thought patterns and hang ups we had before. When we recognize that there are things in our lives that are really inconsistent with our identity in Christ, we've become aware of the flesh. The flesh is our fallen nature that dominated our actions before we received Christ. Now, as Christians, we need to learn how to live as new people, with a whole new identity.

Illustrations (pick one):

- While visiting downtown Manaus (Brazil) one evening, I noticed a pack of young boys picking pockets, stealing from shops, etc. When I asked a native about these boys, he replied "Oh, those are the 'throw-away' kids." These children were abandoned downtown by their parents, and left to survive on their own. They (correctly) viewed themselves as throwaway children, so they stole to survive. Suppose I adopted one of those children and took him home with me. If I took him with me to the grocery store the next day, I wouldn't be surprised if he stole food and stuffed it under his shirt. Until he really understood and believed that his identity had changed (from a throwaway kid to my son), he would probably continue to act as if he didn't have two parents to care for him; once he understood his new identity as a child of loving, caring parents, he would look to us for his provision and his action of stealing would cease.
- The movie *Shawshank Redemption* takes place in a fictional state prison in Maine. An inmate named Brooks is released after spending his entire adult life behind bars. Outside the walls of the prison, he is a new man. But he soon starts to long for his old life back in the prison. In a letter to his friends, Brooks writes, “I have trouble sleeping at night. I have bad dreams like I'm falling. I wake up scared. Sometimes it takes me a while to remember where I am. Maybe I should get me a gun, and rob the Foodway so they'd send me home. I could shoot the manager while I was at it, sort of like a bonus. I guess I'm too old for that sort of nonsense anymore.” He couldn't shake his old identity as a prisoner.
- Benita's Dispatch article.
- Den's illustration about the prisoner in *Walking in Victory*.

How can being a new person in Christ actually change the way we live?

**Most people think I have to stop sinning and do the right thing. This is “Nike Christianity”:
“Just do it.” But in the Bible, learning to do the right thing starts with the way we *think*.**

Romans 12:2a “Don’t copy the behavior and customs of this world, but let God transform you into a new person by changing the way you think.” NLT

“Just do it” doesn’t work. First, we have to change the way we think. **This new way of thinking has three steps: *Know, Consider and Present.***

Romans 6: Know, Consider and Present.

Know (read Romans 6:6-9). We **have to understand what is *true* of us if we are to grow spiritually.** What's your identity? You may have been called names or praised, put in a category or puzzled over. But the Bible contains the truest words you'll ever hear about who you really are. We have to know first and foremost that our identity has changed. What God says about us is true.

Illustration: The Emancipation Proclamation of 1863 meant that slaves were set free as legal citizens. Their identity had legally changed from property to citizens with all of the rights that go with it. The slave owner no longer had the legal right to treat his slaves as property.

You have been set free from your sin nature. You no longer have to do what it says. But it may try to persuade you that you're the same old person you always were. And it will bark out commands like a slave master, demanding that you get back to your old way of life. Fortunately, the sin nature lacks the truth to back up the commands. You aren't a slave to your sin nature, and what it says about you isn't true.

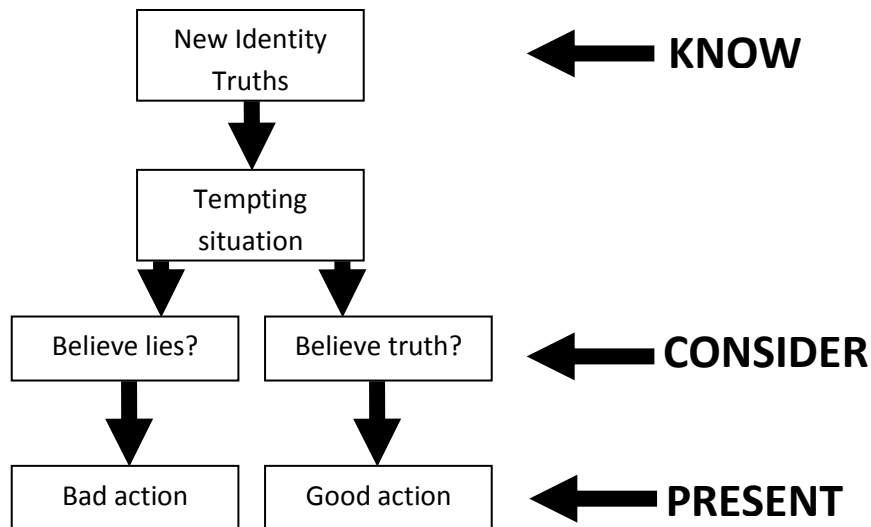
Consider (read **Romans 6:11**). **Consider means "to reckon" or *count* on the facts. We must not only affirm what is true of us, we must mentally apply it in real life situations.** Maybe everything in our being cries out against what is really true. During times like this, we are in a mental battle and at an important crossroads in our spiritual life. What will we believe: what our sin nature says, or what God says about our new identity?

As we keep seeing our old bad habits and ways of dealing with life come to the surface, we need to say, "I know that's the way I used to live, but it's inconsistent with who God has made me. That's not who I am anymore."

Present (read **Romans 6:13**). **Knowing is understanding what's true about our new identity, considering is counting this to be true in a personal way. But presenting means that we *act* on it.**

Illustration: To complete the Emancipation Proclamation analogy, for the slave to "present" himself as a free man, he'd have to take some specific action. He might leave the plantation, refuse to work unless he receives a wage, etc. So too, as Christians, to present ourselves, is to do things that promote our new identity, and demonstrate independence from our sin nature.

An example that illustrates Know, Consider, and Present:



Knowing = Understanding the truth, learning the new identity facts.

Consider = Replacing lies with truth (believing the truth about you in situations where you are tempted).

Present = Acting in a way that is consistent with your new identity.

James' old friends didn't trust him early in his ministry. They knew him from his old life and didn't think he had really changed. At one point, they dumped a cup of water on his head just to piss him off. At that point, James had to decide how he would react. Would he kick their ass or walk away? Would he be controlled by sin nature, OR would he realize he is a new creature, freed from the power of his flesh, and trust God for the strength to do the right thing.

Instructors note: Don't just describe the temptation to do bad things, but the temptation to not do what is good.

Temporal vs. Eternal judgment

We have a new identity in Christ. We are new creatures. God sees us in his son as perfect and forgiven. But our condition is different. We still fall into sin. And this raises an important question: what will God do with a Christian who keeps falling back into serious sin? Will he eventually lose his patience and say enough is enough? Is salvation something we can lose if we "backslide" or is it secure, no matter what we do?

The Bible is very clear that even when Christians go *astray*, God still loves them.

"There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." – Romans 8:1

"If we are unfaithful, he remains faithful, for he cannot deny himself." – 2 Timothy 2:13 (NLT)

"My children, I am writing this so that you will sin. But if you do sin, there is someone to plead for you before the father, he is Jesus Christ, the one who pleases God completely. He is the

sacrifice for our sins. He takes away not only our sin, but the sins of the whole world.” – 1 John 2:1

When we let people down, at first they may be patient with us. But if we disappoint them one too many times, they eventually cut us off. God, however, is not that way. God is not like us.

“My thoughts are completely different than yours, says the lord.
And my ways are completely different than you can imagine.
Just as the heavens are higher than the earth, so my ways are higher than your ways, and my thoughts higher than your thoughts.” – Isaiah 55:8, 9

God says that nothing, not even our *sin*, will ever separate us from his *love*:

“I am convinced that nothing can ever separate us from his love.” – Romans 8:38a

If we forget this, we can fall into a cycle of guilt and despair that eventually drives us away from God. Here’s how it works: “I feel terrible that I sinned, so I need to vow never to sin again. ‘Oops, I did it again.’ Now I’m really going to try to get my act together. But screw it, I want to get high with my friends. Who am I trying to fool? I just need to quit walking with God because he’s done with me anyhow.”

Understanding that God loves you no matter what is a powerful motivation to turn back to him. It’s important that we believe this, especially when we have sinned.

“This High Priest of ours understands our weaknesses, for he faced all of the same temptations we do, yet he did not sin. So let us come boldly to the throne of our gracious God. There we will receive his mercy, and we will find grace to help us when we need it.” – Hebrews 4:15, 16

Memory Verse: 2 Corinthians 5:17