

“Learning to Walk”

First Presbyterian Church
Pastor Dave Carlson
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First Scripture Lesson: 1 John 2:12-14

Epistle Lesson: 2 Thessalonians 2:13-17

How old were you when you learned about nouns, verbs, adjectives and other parts of speech? Maybe 9 or 10, 11 or 12? How many children here today are below age 9? OK. So I'm going to talk a little about adjectives.

An adjective is simply a word that modifies or describes a noun. And a noun is a person, place or thing. If I say, “The church wedding,” the word “church” describes the word “wedding,” and so “church” becomes an adjective or modifier.

Now, what if I say, “The Christian businessman?” I've modified the word “businessman” with the word “Christian.” “Christian” becomes the adjective or the modifier.

But you know what, in a certain sense the word “Christian” should never be an adjective. A Christian is a person, so it's a noun. Why should the word “Christian” never be used as an adjective?

Because an adjective is often used to modify things that are larger or more important than they are. Adjectives can also be used to limit nouns, like in the sentence, “The little man” named Zacchaeus.

When “Christian” becomes an adjective and not a noun, it becomes a label we stick on the surface of our lives, rather than the core of who we are. If I say “the Christian businesswoman,” what's more important?!? That she's a businesswoman or that she is a Christian?

We need to make being a Christian the most important thing in our lives, in your life. “She's a businesswoman AND she's a Christian, a Christ follower.” Now that's saying something! So you see, the word “Christian” is most powerful when it is used as a noun, as the core of who we are, and not some modifier for some other part of our lives, or our identity. As we think about being a Christian as the core of who we are, let's use the rest of our sermon time this morning looking at what makes a person a Christian in the first place.

In the Apostle Paul's second letter to the Thessalonians, he shows us what it is that makes a person a Christian in the first place.

So you young people here today – you may want to listen extra carefully, because this sermon is especially for you, and for anyone who is young in the faith, so to speak.

The sermon is also for those more mature in the faith, those of us who can look back to when we first came to believe, and look forward to what we can give to a young person or anyone new to the faith.

One of the first things Paul does in his second letter to the Thessalonians is give thanks to God for them, “because,” says Paul, “God chose (them) as the first fruits for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit, and through belief in the truth.”

Wow! There are some big words in that sentence, aren’t there? Words like salvation, which means embraced by God. “Salvation” is God’s big hug, given to us, especially when we’ve done something wrong. When you’ve done something wrong, God does not punish you. God embraces you, hugs you and loves on you. That’s the first thing young Christians need to know – God loves you no matter what. Salvation.

The second big word in Paul’s sentence I read is “sanctification.” Sanctification means to be made holy, pure, innocent; to be more like Jesus. Paul says that we are sanctified – “by the Spirit of God, and through belief in the truth.” Notice the word “and” in that sentence. “And” is a conjunction; it’s the glue that holds words together. In this case, “and” connects the phrase “Spirit of God” to our “belief in the truth,” belief in Jesus. Sanctification – becoming more like Jesus requires both God and us. Sanctification involves *both* the work of God’s Spirit *and* our belief in Jesus Christ.

As one old-time preacher explained it, sanctification involves the hand of God reaching down to us and our hand reaching up to grasp it. When God reaches down to us, it is only those who believe in God who will actually reach up to grab God’s hand to receive the hug of salvation – God’s unconditional love- and embrace the work of sanctification- becoming more like Jesus.

Now everybody here likes to be hugged, right? Especially children being hugged by a parent. And what better parent to receive a hug from than God the father, the best parent there is. And all it takes is believing in Jesus and reaching up to take God’s hand.

Now the coolest thing about being a Christian is that once you claim your identity as a Christian, once you say that you believe in Jesus and really mean it, there is nothing that can ever separate you from the love of God, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

And even better news is that you don't have to do anything but accept Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior, as the ruler of your life, as the one and only pathway to God's big hug. It's just like what Paul said at the beginning. "God chose you as the first fruits for salvation," as new Christians, "through," says Paul, "our proclamation of the good news" of Jesus Christ, that God sent Jesus into the world, that Jesus is God's only son, perfect in every way, and that Jesus sacrificed himself for our salvation, for our God hug.

When Paul talks about people becoming Christians through "our" proclamation, what is he referring to? He's referring to the teaching of any Christian who helps a new believer to embrace the God hug, and to follow Jesus and the church in becoming a better Christian.

Each of us here has a long way to go in becoming a better Christian; that's true for everybody. It's true whether you are a new Christian, a mature Christian or a long-time, older Christian.

Next Sunday, we will look at what it means to be a mature Christian. It may mean you've been a Christian for a long time, and yet, new Christians can show surprising spiritual maturity and wisdom, even teaching Sunday school, right Meghan? Or asking insightful questions like Sarah, our junior theologian.

Being a mature Christian may mean that you are getting a little tired, a little frustrated, a little skeptical, a little impatient when it comes to the fullness of Christ's promises. I mean, one look at the world today and anybody would be wondering how can this be, when will Jesus come and set things right again?

That's what we'll look at next week – what it means to be a mature Christian. But for now, we can all be better Christians by focusing on Paul's final instruction in today's reading. Are you ready for it? Ok, here it is:

After telling new Christians that God chose them for salvation – for the God hug – and that God's greatest desire is for us to reach out to God when he reaches out to us, and that in Christ we have already been made right with God – no matter what we might have done – after saying all this to the new Christians in the city of Thessalonica and newer Christians here today. Paul tells them -tells us- (quote) to "stand firm and hold fast to the traditions that you were taught, either by word of mouth or by ... letter," by scripture. In other words, keep doing what the church teaches you to do when it comes to becoming more like Jesus.

For the children and youth here today – and others in the first stages of being a Christian – that means going to LOGOS on Wednesdays and Sunday school and worship on Sundays.

For the more mature Christian here today, it means taking on a devotional practice, studying the Bible, reading books or watching videos by more mature Christians. And of course, for the most mature Christians, it means leading Sunday school or a small group, mentoring a youth in the Tuxis confirmation class, being on the ministry team for LOGOS, and maintaining the foundations of our faith, through committee work, serving on other ministry teams, being a leader in the community, at your workplace, in your family, a leader who always puts his or her identity as a Christian first.

In other words, it means being a mother or father, daughter or son, an aunt or uncle, a boss or a co-worker or volunteer who is, first and foremost, a Christian. Not perfect, but always striving to be better in God's eyes, and helping others to do the same. Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER

O Lord, you told us if we do the things you say, our lives will be built on a rock, and if not, then we are on shaky ground.

Knowing that, we still manage to ignore it in many ways. We take those major growth steps that could be done in the Spirit of slow-and-steady growth, and we wait until some crisis that sends us running to you.

Save us from such foolishness. Give us wisdom to accept the sure foundation you have made for us, and to maintain it and build it, up for ourselves and for all those coming up in the faith behind us and around us.

We pray your Spirit of comfort and provision for all those we know who stand before you in need this day.

We pray all this in the name of Jesus Christ, who taught us to pray together, saying:

**Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts,
as we forgive our debtors;
and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.**