



LIFE AT ITS BEST

Course 1, *Basic Christianity*, Lesson 6

The Problem: We have studied the steps involved in coming to know Christ as a personal Savior from sin. When we first accept Christ, there's often an initial burst of joy, hope, and passion as we embrace our new faith. However, even after accepting Him and enjoying the new birth experience, it's common to experience spiritual highs and lows. This cycle of joy followed by discouragement is a natural part of spiritual growth and maturity. It's in these moments of discouragement that faith can grow stronger, as believers learn to trust God not only in joyful times but also in seasons of difficulty.

This lesson explains how, after accepting Christ, you can experience a joyful journey of transformation, growth, and victory in Christ.

For Augustine of Hippo, the journey of faith exemplifies the highs and lows mentioned above. His life is a powerful testament to the process of initial joy, struggles with discouragement, and eventual deep transformation in Christ. Augustine's early life was marked by restlessness and spiritual searching. He famously pursued various philosophies and worldly pleasures but found them unsatisfying. His conversion, as described in his work Confessions, was a profound moment of joy and surrender. After reading Romans 13:13-14, he felt deeply convicted and gave his life to Christ.

However, Augustine didn't experience smooth sailing after his conversion. Like many believers, he faced challenges, temptations, and moments of doubt. Over time, he grew by relying on God's grace and immersing himself in prayer, Scripture, and theological reflection. He became one of Christianity's most influential thinkers, emphasizing themes like God's sovereignty and humanity's need for grace. Augustine's story reveals that discouragement can be a stepping stone in spiritual growth. He learned to rest in God's presence, famously saying, "You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in You." His life shows that spiritual transformation is a journey, not a one-time event.

Martin Luther's journey of faith also reflected the initial spiritual highs, the challenges of discouragement, and the eventual deepening of his reliance on God. Before his transformative moment, Luther struggled intensely with feelings of guilt, unworthiness, and the fear of God's judgment. As a monk, he adhered strictly to religious practices but found no peace in them. His inner turmoil reached its peak during his search for assurance of salvation. The breakthrough came when Luther studied the Bible, particularly Romans 1:17: "*The righteous shall live by faith.*" This realization—that salvation is a gift of grace through faith in Jesus Christ, not something earned by works—brought him profound joy and clarity. It marked the beginning of the Protestant Reformation as he sought to align the church's teachings with this central truth.

However, Luther's faith journey was not free of difficulties. He faced fierce opposition, excommunication, and physical danger after nailing his 95 Theses to the church door in Wittenberg. Despite these struggles, he remained steadfast, drawing strength from his belief in God's sovereignty. His famous words at the Diet of Worms, "Here I stand, I can do no other," showcase his unwavering faith even in the face of adversity. Luther's spiritual growth, much like Augustine's, involved wrestling with doubt, experiencing God's grace, and standing firm during challenging times. His life reminds us that spiritual transformation is both a personal journey and a profound witness to the world.

John Wesley's spiritual journey is another powerful example of the "joy and discouragement" cycle in faith, culminating in a profound transformation. For much of his early life, Wesley sought to live a holy and disciplined life through rigorous religious practices. He was deeply committed to prayer, fasting, and missionary work, but despite these efforts, he felt a sense of spiritual emptiness and doubt. His missionary trip to America in the early 1730s was particularly discouraging—it ended in failure, and he returned to England feeling defeated and uncertain about his faith. The turning point for Wesley came on May 24, 1738, at a meeting on Aldersgate Street in London. While listening to a reading of Martin Luther's preface to the Epistle to the Romans, Wesley experienced what he described as his "heart being strangely warmed." He wrote in his journal that he felt assured of his salvation and God's grace, not through his works, but through faith in Christ.

This moment of assurance did not eliminate all challenges or discouragements for Wesley, but it gave him a renewed confidence and joy in his relationship with God. It also fueled his ministry, leading to a great spiritual revival. He emphasized the importance of personal faith, social holiness, and the ongoing pursuit of sanctification—a life transformed by God's grace. He became one of the most influential evangelists and soul-winners of the 18th century.

The journeys of Augustine, Luther and Wesley shows how discouragement can lead to a deeper reliance on God's grace and a more profound understanding of faith. These reformers remind us that the Christian journey is a process filled with highs and lows, but guided by God's grace at every step. Their lives show that faith deepens and grows when we rely on God, embrace challenges, and trust His plan.

As followers of Christ, desiring to live victorious and radiant lives, we may find ourselves struggling in a losing battle against our own weaknesses and habits. How can this experience of habitual defeat be transformed into one of consistent victory? What are the foundational principles of a thriving Christian life? Are we caught in moments of discouragement, surrendering to temptation, or responding to challenges, frustrations, and conflicts in ways that fail to reflect the character of Christ? These are questions that invite us to pause, reflect, and seek God's grace to live out the transformation He promises.

Objectives:

- I. We examine why sin becomes habitual, understanding the deeper struggles within human nature.
- II. We explore the purpose of God's law and its correct function in guiding our lives.
- III. We assess whether human willpower alone is sufficient to overcome sin and what role divine strength plays in victory.
- IV. We analyze the impact of good works and their relationship to faith, clarifying their place in a believer's life.
- V. We reflect on the most essential aspect of the Christian life, identifying what truly defines a faithful walk with Christ.

I. WHY DO I SIN HABITUALLY?

1. How does Paul describe his struggles with the problem of sin?
For what I am doing, I do not understand. For what I will to do, that I do not practice; but what I hate, that I do. But now, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells in me. Romans 7:15, 17
2. Did Paul's struggle with sin go on after he had accepted Christ? Why?
For the flesh lusts against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; and these are contrary to one another, so that you do not do the things that you wish. Galatians 5:17; See also 1 Corinthians 9:27
3. What did Jesus say about the person who struggles with sin?

Jesus answered them, "Most assuredly, I say to you, whoever commits sin is a slave of sin. And a slave does not abide in the house forever, but a son abides forever. Therefore if the Son makes you free, you shall be free indeed. John 8:34-36

Do you not know that to whom you present yourselves slaves to obey, you are that one's slaves whom you obey, whether of sin leading to death, or of obedience leading to righteousness? But God be thanked that though you were slaves of sin, yet you obeyed from the heart that form of doctrine to which you were delivered. And having been set free from sin, you became slaves of righteousness. Romans 6:16-18

Explanation: Even after becoming Christian, the Apostle Paul had struggles with temptation and sin. The flesh warred against the Spirit. Like Paul, the new Christian has received the Holy Spirit into his heart (John 3:5-8), but he still has struggles against his fallen humanity with all its inherited and cultivated tendencies to evil. Paul knew how strong these tendencies are and how easily even a professing Christian could fall.

While sin harms fellowship with God and lead to feelings of separation, it does not sever the relationship unless we willfully and persistently harden our hearts and choose to turn away from God. He does not force us to be His children. The foundation of a Christian's relationship with God is His grace and forgiveness, not our perfection. See Romans 8; 1 John 1:9; Ephesians 2:8-9. While sin can involve personal struggles, a loss of peace, or harm in relationships, God's mercy and grace are always available for restoration. The Christian journey is about continually turning back to God and growing closer to Him.

Relevance: It is encouraging to know that the Bible describes the very same struggle with sin that you and I have, and that we are not the only ones with this problem. Understanding why we have an intense struggle after becoming Christians is part of the answer to our problem.

Habitual sin is something many people struggle with, even those deeply committed to their faith. It often stems from a combination of internal and external factors and understanding these can help in breaking free from destructive patterns. The Bible encourages believers to confess their struggles (1 John 1:9), to rely on the power of the Holy Spirit (Galatians 5:16), and to find accountability within a loving community (James 5:16).

These passages highlight the power of Jesus to free people from the grip of sin and its effects. It underscores the need to trust Him as the only one who can bring this kind of freedom—one that leads to a lasting, transformative relationship with God.

II. WHY DOES GOD HAVE A LAW, AND WHAT IS ITS CORRECT FUNCTION?

The law of God is a standard of behavior. It was never intended to save from sin. Rather its function is to point out sin. The law tells us that we have fallen from God's standard. Thus, the law condemns us to death when we fall. This does not imply that the law is something bad. It is the just and holy expression of God's will for us.

The Word:

4. How does Paul explain the law as a standard of behavior?

Therefore by the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight, for by the law is the knowledge of sin. Romans 3:20; 7:7; See also 1 Timothy 1:9.

5. Because he had broken the law, what sentence did Paul face?

I was alive once without the law, but when the commandment came, sin revived, and I died. And the commandment, which was to bring life, I found to bring death. For sin, taking occasion by the

commandment, deceived me, and by it killed me. Therefore the law is holy, and the commandment holy and just and good. Has then what is good become death to me? Certainly not! But sin, that it might appear sin, was producing death in me through what is good, so that sin through the commandment might become exceedingly sinful. For we know that the law is spiritual, but I am carnal, sold under sin.
Romans 7:9-14

6. To whom does the law point us as the means of salvation?

For what the law could not do in that it was weak through the flesh, God did by sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, on account of sin: He condemned sin in the flesh, ⁴ that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. Romans 8:3-4; See also Galatians 3:24.

Explanation: There are many Christians who think that since Calvary the law of God no longer applies. As we have seen, Paul regarded the Ten Commandments as holy, and just, and good" (Romans 7:12). They still functioned after the cross by pointing out Paul's sin (Romans 7:7). It is very important to understand that the law as a standard of righteousness could never be abolished. If God's law could have been changed, Christ need not have died. In that case, God could have saved us merely by changing the rules. Christ died "*that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit*" Romans 8:4.

Other Bible writers strongly emphasize that the law of God is His unchanging standard of righteousness. James likened the law to a mirror which we look into to see if we are spiritually clean (James 1:22-25). James quoted the Ten Commandments and pointed out that if you break one of them you are guilty of breaking them all (James 2:10-12). John declared that anyone who claims to know God and does not keep His law is a liar (1 John 2:3-4). Jesus told His disciples, "*If you love Me, keep my commandments*" John 14:15.

Relevance: The law has three functions: It is a divine standard of righteousness; it justly condemns the sinner to death; and it points the sinner to Christ. But never does the Bible say that law keeping of any kind or degree will earn God's forgiveness for past sin or save you for eternity. Therefore, your good works, your efforts to obey God, are not ever the means of your salvation. That point will become clearer as we proceed.

III. IS OUR WILLPOWER SUFFICIENT TO WIN THE BATTLE WITH SIN?

There are many professed Christians who think their wills are strong enough to overcome sin and enable them to do what is right. The Bible denies that!

The Word:

7. What did Paul have to say about the strength of his will?

For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh) nothing good dwells; for to will is present with me, but how to perform what is good I do not find. Romans 7:18

8. How did Jesus describe the problem in the lives of His disciples?

Watch and pray, lest you enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.
Matthew 26:41

9. Do we have the ability to choose to follow Christ?

I call heaven and earth as witnesses today against you, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing; therefore choose life, that both you and your descendants may live. Deuteronomy 30:19.
See also Joshua 24:15; John 7:17.

10. Having chosen Christ, what is the means by which we are saved from sin and empowered to do His will?
For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, ⁹ not of works, lest anyone should boast. ¹⁰ For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them. Ephesians 2:8-10, See also Galatians 2:16.

11. What does the gift of grace do for you?
I thank my God always concerning you for the grace of God which was given to you by Christ Jesus, that you were enriched in everything by Him in all utterance and all knowledge, 1 Corinthians 1:4-5. See also 2 Corinthians 9:8.

Explanation: The Bible teaches that you can choose to do what is right, but, apart from Christ, you cannot follow through and put your choice into action. Paul wrote: *"For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh) nothing good dwells; for to will is present with me, but how to perform what is good I do not find"* Romans 7:18. Jesus identified the same problem in His disciples. He said: *"The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak"* Matthew 26:41. In other words, your will is so weak that Satan, who is stronger, can overcome you unless you choose Christ and allow Him to overcome for you! We can choose Christ or Satan. But we only have the power to obey God's law as we habitually choose Christ and invite Him to be our conqueror!

Some people believe that we do not even have the ability to choose Christ. They say that He chooses us; we do not choose Him. And they argue that He only chooses certain people, and that the rest are automatically lost. Now Scripture is clear that Christ leads us to the point of repentance (Romans 2:4), but it is also clear that He gives to every one of us the ability to choose Him. All through Scripture are statements that only make sense because mankind is given the capacity to choose. *"Therefore, choose life, that you and your descendants may live, loving the Lord your God, obeying His voice, and cleaving to him; for that means life to you and length of days"* Deuteronomy 30:19-20 RSV. Joshua challenged the people of his day to make a choice, either of the Lord or of the heathen deities of the surrounding nations (Joshua 24:15). Jesus implied that our wills are capable of making a choice when He said: *"If anyone wills to do His will, he shall know concerning the doctrine, whether it is from God or whether I speak on My own authority"* John 7:17. We must respond to God's grace by choosing to serve Christ, relying not on our own strength but on the transformative power of the Holy Spirit. Through His power at work in us, we are able to resist the evil one and walk in victory.

God's grace is the gift of power or righteousness to us. See Ezekiel 36:27, 1 John 2:27. Paul made it very clear that we do not become righteous by our works of law (Romans 3:20-21). Righteousness is ours if we have faith in Christ (verse 22). It is His gift of grace (verse 24). This is the experience of righteousness by faith (or grace) alone. Faith is our part; it is acceptance of Christ into our hearts by the Holy Spirit. Grace is God's part; it is His gift of power (righteousness) to our hearts by the Holy Spirit. God's grace is a mighty power in our lives. Paul could say: *"I thank my God always concerning you for the grace of God which was given to you by Christ Jesus, ⁵ that you were enriched in everything by Him in all utterance and all knowledge, even as the testimony of Christ was confirmed in you, so that you come short in no gift, eagerly waiting for the revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ"* 1 Corinthians 1:4-7. If God's grace can enable us to work that effectively for the Lord, it is, indeed, a supreme power in our lives.

Relevance: Here is the answer to the sin problem. When we are tempted, we turn to Christ and pray: "Lord I cannot overcome this. I am helpless. Lord please give me the victory. Give me Your power, Your righteousness. Then we can affirm His Gift by praying "Thank you, Lord. I believe you have heard. I believe You have given me the victory." All three prayers are vitally important. Don't keep asking for power and never thanking the Lord for answering. This is an expression of your faith in Christ. And He will answer by giving you the grace to overcome! See John 15:5, Philipians 4:6-7 and II Corinthians 12:9.

Sometimes our sin has a psychological or physiological component, so seeking help from counselors, therapists, or medical professionals can be crucial. This doesn't contradict faith but rather complements it.

IV. WHAT DO GOOD WORKS ACCOMPLISH? WHAT IS THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN WORKS AND FAITH?

Works of faith are the good works which follow as the result of the gift of Christ's righteousness to your heart. You believe, Jesus gives His righteousness to you by the Holy Spirit, and then you do what God wants you to do. The good works do not earn righteousness; they are the result of the gift.

The Word:

12. What did Paul say is the result of our faith?

Do we then make void the law through faith? Certainly not! On the contrary, we establish the law.

Romans 3:31; compare Romans 2:13

13. Where is the law of God established when you believe in Jesus?

For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put My laws in their mind and write them on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people. Hebrews 8:10

14. What did James teach regarding works?

What does it profit, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can faith save him? ¹⁵ If a brother or sister is naked and destitute of daily food, and one of you says to them, "Depart in peace, be warmed and filled," but you do not give them the things which are needed for the body, what does it profit? Thus also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead. But someone will say, "You have faith, and I have works." Show me your faith without your works, and I will show you my faith by my works. You believe that there is one God. You do well. Even the demons believe—and tremble! ²⁰ But do you want to know, O foolish man, that faith without works is dead? James 2:14-20

Explanation: Paul pointed out that faith does not destroy the law of God; it establishes it (Romans 3:31). Where is the law established? In the heart of the true believer in Christ (Hebrews 8:10). People cannot claim to be justified Christians unless they are doers of the law (Romans 2:13).

Neither Paul nor James taught that works of law will save you. Both taught that works of obedience to God's law will inevitably follow if you have faith in Christ. In fact, Paul and James made it clear that, if you are not obeying God by doing what He asks of you, that is evidence that you do not really have faith. James explained: *"Thus also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead"* James 2:17. Works of faith are works that result from faith, and that give evidence that your faith is genuine.

The Bible does teach that believers and non-believers will be judged according to their deeds. See Revelation 20:12, 2 Corinthians 5:10, Matthew 16:27 and Jeremiah 17:10. These passages emphasize that works are important in the judgment process—not as the basis of salvation, but as evidence of one's heart and faith.

Relevance: Genuine faith produces good works as a natural outflow of a transformed life. Works serve as the fruit of faith and a reflection of the believer's relationship with Christ (Galatians 5:22-23). God judges us by our works, not because we are saved by works, but because good works give evidence that we have true, living faith in Jesus. See Revelation 20:12; 22:12; 2 Corinthians 5:10; Matthew 16:27; Jeremiah 17:10.

Do you seek Christ daily in prayer, asking for His strength to overcome sin and grow in His likeness, so that your thoughts, words, and actions increasingly reflect His presence in your life?

V. WHAT IS THE MOST IMPORTANT ASPECT OF OUR CHRISTIAN LIFE?

When you pray in faith, trusting in Jesus, He enters your heart through the Holy Spirit. This is a divine mystery, yet a profound spiritual reality. It is Jesus within you who grants victory over sin and becomes your righteousness. As Martin Luther beautifully expressed: 'The Christ who is grasped by faith and who dwells in the heart is the true Christian righteousness, on account of which God declares us righteous and grants us eternal life.' (Luther's Works, Vol. 26, p. 130).

The Word:

15: How did Jesus say He would come to us after His ascension to heaven?

And I will pray the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may abide with you forever— the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees Him nor knows Him; but you know Him, for He dwells with you and will be in you. ¹⁸ I will not leave you orphans; I will come to you. John 14:16-18

16. When Jesus becomes a part of our lives what special gift does He bring?

But you are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you. Now if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he is not His. And if Christ is in you, the body is dead because of sin, but the Spirit is life because of righteousness. Romans 8:9-10

17. What does Jesus do for us after He has come into our hearts?

I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me. Galatians 2:20

Explanation: The life of righteousness is a life in union with Christ. Christ within is our "*wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption*" 1 Corinthians 1:30. The believer in Christ does good works only because Christ is working through him. Jesus does not say to us, "You do righteous works, and then I will save you." He says, "You invite me into your life, and I will be your righteousness, and do good works through you." What a wonderful gift that is! Christ Jesus bestows Himself upon us, and His righteous indwelling is our qualification for salvation.

Christ comes to us through the Holy Spirit. As Scripture says, "*You are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you. Now if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he is not His*" Romans 8:9. This means that a person who claims to follow Christ must have the Holy Spirit living and working within them, as evidence of true faith. While sin does hinder our fellowship with God, it does not permanently sever our relationship with Him if we belong to Christ. However, repentance and seeking forgiveness are necessary to restore our communion with God and allow the Holy Spirit to work freely in our lives. "*And if Christ is in you, the body is dead because of sin, but the Spirit is life because of righteousness*" Romans 8:10. Therefore, living as a victorious Christian means having Christ, through the Holy Spirit, dwelling powerfully within us. This divine presence transforms us, making us righteous—not by our works, but by His righteousness living through us, as Paul writes: "*It is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me*" Galatians 2:20.

Relevance: The call to our hearts comes directly from heaven itself. Have you made the choice to accept Christ as your Savior and your indwelling righteousness? Do you begin each day by seeking Him in prayer, inviting His presence to guide you? And when temptation arises, do you turn to Jesus, asking Him to overcome on your behalf, and then respond in faith by thanking Him for the victory He has provided?

Review Questions

1. True or False:

- a. It is impossible for a Christian to stop sinning habitually.
- b. Law-keeping will make you right with God.
- c. We do not have the power to choose Christ.
- d. Christ living in you by the Holy Spirit is the secret of victorious living.

2. Discuss: If good works do not contribute to our salvation, why does God call us to live righteously? Do they serve a deeper purpose beyond personal merit? How do works reflect faith, and can someone truly be saved without them? What does Scripture reveal about the role of obedience in the life of a believer?