

Series: Forward / Today's Message: A Forward-Looking Vision--Inward

Jeff Kennedy 11/1/20

Introduction: I grew up in the **"Look but don't touch church."** God was a high doctrine, worship was distant, passionless, and hypnotic; and outsiders—*particularly if they used salty language, smoked, chewed, drank and feuded with their neighbors* (which is a description of my dad)—were not welcome. And you may not hear that in so many words—but whenever dad would come to church with Mom and us boys, you could just feel the derision, the disapproval—it was atmospheric in that little country church.

That church also tended to chase off good pastors who preached the gospel and attracted bad pastors who slept around. I watched my childhood pastor be essentially driven out of that church by a family who had formed a faction that decided for whatever reason—they just didn't like all that preaching the gospel, and reading and teaching from the Bible, and calling sinners to repentance.

When I talk about having an "Inward Vision" for our church—I am not talking about becoming a group of inwardly focused people who just come to consume a Sunday product. Or, whose relationships have become ingrown to the exclusion of visitors. The message that ingrown Christianity sends is, **"We've already got our peer group—you find yours. We've got our friends, and we don't need to spend much energy or attention on people outside the box."** Now, that for sure is NOT the vision we have for CCC. And while every church in the world struggles against this tendency—to become ingrown—we also don't want to neglect the inward calling to grow the church in terms of its spiritual health. *The Spiritual health of Jesus's church is vitally important.*

Our Mission: (Upward) Our mission is to make disciples of Jesus who **gather to worship** God in Spirit and in Truth; (Inward) who **grow in the grace and knowledge** of the Lord Jesus Christ; (Outward) and who **go** into all the world **proclaiming the Gospel**.

Today we're going to focus on the second plank in that calling, that mission—to take those gathered, worshiping disciples and grow them up in the faith—in the grace and the knowledge of the Lord Jesus.

Text: 2 Peter 3:17–18 "Therefore, dear friends, since you know this in advance, be on your guard, so that you are not led away by the error of lawless people and fall from your own stable position. ¹⁸ But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be the glory both now and to the day of eternity."

Let's take a few minutes and unpack this passage and its implications...

1. We guard ourselves against any error that would lead us into spiritual uncertainty.

Uncertainty about the future is a cause of anxiety and instability today.

Our inability to live with life's unknowns can fuel our worry and anxiety.

3:4 Above all, be aware of this: **Scoffers** will come in the **last days mocking** and following their own evil desires, ⁴ saying, "Where is his '**coming**' that he promised? Ever since our ancestors fell asleep, all things continue as they have been since the beginning of creation." **Why would this be so important to our spiritual growth?** What is the doubt and uncertainty that these mockers are sowing? It's uncertainty about his glorious return. It's been a while. Now, this chapter is Peter's warning against mockers and false teachers who lead God's people away from the expectation of Christ's glorious return:

Gain a heavenly perspective on all this...

3:8 Dear friends, don't overlook this one fact: With the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years like one day. ⁹The Lord does not delay his promise, as some understand delay, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish but all to come to repentance. God doesn't experience time the way we do. And He has delayed the 2nd coming so that he can reach more with the Good News.

We must gain a historical perspective on all this...

¹⁰But the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night on that day the heavens will pass away with a loud noise, the elements will burn and be dissolved, and the earth and the works on it will be burned up. ¹¹Since all these things are to be dissolved in this way, it is clear what sort of people you should be in holy conduct and godliness ¹²as you wait for the day of God and hasten its coming... ¹³But based on his promise, we wait for new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness dwells.

Untaught, unstable people will mock you, distort the Scriptures including Paul's letters, and try to lead away into any other ideology than the hope of the Gospel.

3:17 Therefore, dear friends, since you know this in advance, be on your guard (**take a defensive stance**), so that you are not led away by the error of lawless people and fall from your own stable position.

Why mention all this first? Our inward mission of growing spiritually is not therapeutic; it's not just a catharsis; or a personal tonic to calm our anxiety—or a self-actualization project. Our Spirituality is located within our Eschatology. Our story is an eschatological one. It's a story about how the world started and how it is saved and how it will end—being brought to its intended completion in new creation. So our conversation about spirituality isn't abstract, it's framed by our end-times story.

Peter Says: Don't let any mockers, or false teachers, or unstable, untaught people take this hope away from you—or replace it with any errant ideology that takes you away from your hope in Christ. **Because the cost, he says, will be your stability.**

2. Grace: the art of becoming like Jesus. After Peter grounds us in our worldview which provides stability for the believer. He tells us this:

¹⁸ But grow in the **grace...** of our Lord and Savior, Jesus the Messiah. Paul tells us to **receive grace**, Peter tells us to **grow in it**. How do we grow in grace? First, what is grace? John Stott said, "Grace is love that cares and stoops and rescues." Grace is God's gift of salvation at his own expense—so lavish, so extravagant the gift that it doesn't expect **repayment** but does demand **repentance**.

How do we grow in the grace of our Savior and Lord?

Practice mercy. Jesus illustrates God's heart for outsiders in his enduring portrait of God as a father who patiently waits for his rebellious son to return. But instead of giving us a systematic theology on God's fatherly nature, Jesus tells us a story. **One of the most captivating lines to begin any story ever...**

"There was a man who had two sons."

In the story, a young man demands his share of the inheritance and storms off in a huff, blazing his own trail. Once the rebellious son makes it to the big city, he blows through his portion of the estate in fast living. His foolishness leads to poverty, and he finds himself temping for a swine farmer. Pigs were religiously unclean animals to the Jews.

So the idea of the young man surviving on leftover pigs gruel would have been particularly abhorrent to Jesus' hearers.

In addition to this offensive vocation, Jesus caricatures the youth as contemptuous of authority. Theirs was a high honor culture. It would have been particularly disrespectful for a Jewish boy to demand his share of the estate from a living parent. This insolent behavior would have put him in direct violation of Moses' command to honor one's mother and father. **Jesus' portrait of the rebellious son has left no margin for his redemption in the Judaism of Jesus' day.** The young man is as lost as a man can be.

The flashpoint of change for the prodigal son was that his misery factor exceeded his shame factor. The agony of his poverty became louder than the need to hold on to his pride. Broke and ritually contaminated, the young man has a remarkable epiphany:

"**Even the hired help on my father's estate live better than this.**"

"**When he came to his senses,**" because this is what makes repentance possible.

He returns to home to surprising reception. The Father runs out to greet him, orders his servants to clothe him in the family robe of honor, the signet ring placed on his finger. The reprobate is reinstated. Forgiveness is God's response to the repentant of heart.

And if God has forgiven our sins who is it that still holds them against us? If God has forgiven those who have wronged me, on what grounds would I still hold them blameworthy?

Grace is the art of becoming like Jesus. And the chief skill set of that is becoming a practitioner of mercy. Those who practice mercy are quick to offer forgiveness and to ask for it. They are quick to reconcile and to keep short accounts with others.

3. Knowledge: the art of knowing Jesus.

2 Pet 3:18 "But grow in the grace and **knowledge** of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ."

2 Pet 1:5 "For this very reason, make every effort to supplement your faith with goodness, goodness with **knowledge**"

The word he uses here for "knowledge" is *gnosis* meaning, "comprehension or intellectual grasp of something."¹ This kind of knowledge has to do with content mastery of a body of facts.

Matt 28:19-20 "Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,²⁰ teaching them to observe everything I have commanded you." The contents of the Christ-follower's discipleship include the pattern of Jesus's gracious life; and the teachings of Jesus on what to believe and how to live.

What about the objection that Knowledge growth can be detrimental?

1 Cor 8:8 "Knowledge puffs up but love builds up." I would answer this objection by saying this is a statement about our need **for balance and tension**. Balance, in that *if* we focus on being sappy love-machines and lack knowledge of the contents of our faith we will not do much good for the Gospel. And if we are unbalanced **toward knowledge growth** to the detriment of growing in the grace and mercy of Christ we will tend to morph into modern Pharisees: men who were legendary for their pugilism, snooty superiority, and legalistic righteousness. **If we fail to grow in the grace of Jesus commensurately, we will actually transform into enemies of the cross.**

But the uses of this term *gnosis* in a positive light far outweigh cautionary passages.

- God himself is a "**knowing**" being: Paul tells us that God possesses unfathomable knowledge in this respect
Rom 11:33 "Oh, the depth of the riches and the **wisdom** and the **knowledge** of God! How unsearchable his **judgments** and untraceable his **ways!**" God knows only and all truth propositions, he does not hold any false beliefs. But he also is unfathomably wise, his understanding of how all things fit together in his plan is unsearchable.
- Jesus is the **key** to the **knowledge** of God: In Lk 11:52; "Woe to you legal experts—because you have taken away the **key** to **knowledge.**" The key to knowledge is "the knowledge of God in Christ."
- The local Church has the capacity for **mutual instruction**: Rom 15:14 "My brothers and sisters, I myself am convinced about you that you also are full of goodness, filled with **all knowledge**, and able to **instruct one another.**" Paul's desire is that the local church reflect the good and gracious pattern of Christ's love and are filled with all knowledge, able to instruct one another.

¹ William Arndt et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 203.

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- The sacrificial **love** of the cross **surpasses** our need for knowledge: Eph 3:17-19 “that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. I pray that you, being rooted and firmly established in **love**,¹⁸ may be able to **comprehend** with all the saints what is the length and width, height and depth of God’s love,¹⁹ and to **know** Christ’s love that **surpasses knowledge**, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.” In other words, “personally knowing Christ’s love surpasses knowing about Christ’s love.” The word he uses for “surpass” here is the Greek term *hyperballō* which is where we get the term “hyperbole.” *ballō* means “to throw; as in throwing a shotput” and *hyper* means “supercede” or “beyond.” So the idea here is really that the knowledge of the mystery of Christ’s gospel: Gentile inclusion as coheirs and co-members of the same body with the Jews. That is an **exceedingly great revelation which Paul considers to be the highest calling of a human being**—to cast light on that mystery—to reveal that secret hidden in ages past. Now he says, my prayer for you is that you would be grounded and rooted in the love of Jesus—knowing the love of Christ which now surpasses, transcends this great mystery of knowledge.

We are called to grow in the grace and the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus the Messiah.

To reflect Jesus’s gracious, merciful and forgiving heart in love. And called to grow in the depth and insight in the knowledge of Christ.

Illus. Lifeway and Ligonier Ministries have jointly conducted survey research on evangelicals since 2014. The results for 2019 are predictable and in some cases quite jarring.²

Here’s how respondents answered “yes” to the following statements. These are evangelical, Bible believing Christians:

- Religious belief is a matter of personal opinion: it is not about objective truth (54%)
- The Bible contains helpful accounts of ancient myths but is not factually true (48%)
- The Holy Spirit is a force and not a person (46%)
- God accepts worship from all religions (42%)
- Jesus was a great teacher but not God (30%): a third of respondents said they believed that Jesus was the first and greatest creation of God.
- Jesus was merely a great teacher (30%)
- Gender identity is a matter of choice (22%)
- God counts a person righteous by works, not by faith alone in Christ alone (12%)

² <https://thestateoftheology.com/>

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Why bring all this up? Because we need these three competencies in the Christian faith: (1) we need grace literacy: a gracious competency; (2) we need biblical literacy: a competent knowledge of the Word and the gospel. (3) and we need theological literacy—a competent knowledge of doctrinal truths of the faith.

Our Vision: Now all of this of course is “Lord willing and the Covid don’t rise” goals.

1. **Training: 60%-80% completion of a spiritual growth core track: Foundations of Christian Theology; Foundations of Christian Life; Spiritual Gifts Assessment; First Principles of the Gospel; and First Principles of Evangelism and Outreach**
Leadership Training: School of Leadership: Bible, Theology, Ministry Seminar and Practicum: For the training and certification of high capacity leaders including deacons, elders, future missionaries, and prospective staffers
2. **Community: 40-60 small groups, house churches, and elective courses available throughout the week; to gather disciples in community around the word—the Jerusalem and house-to-house model (Acts 2).**
3. **Marriage Coaching: For those who are struggling, or have lost hope, Marriage Coaching gives you the skills to resolve conflicts and gives you a hopeful vision of God-honoring and healthy marriage. Our Marriage Teams ministry is one of the most important ministries in this church.**