

"Keep Coming to the True Fountain"

Testimony: Before I get to the message, I'm going to ask, in just a moment, for one of our elder candidates to come up and share his testimony. We will be doing this each week for the next three weekends. Each of these men was nominated for the *Leadership Development Process*. They were assessed and have met and worked with other elders and me for the last year. This week Keith Wigle is going to come up and share just a bit of his story. -- *Thank you!*

Next week we will be back into our longer series on *The Story of God and the Struggles of Life*. In the last three weeks we've looked at three truths: 1.) God is the fountain of life – we find life in Him. 2.) To find life in God, we to turn from our broken cisterns. 3.) We have to actually *put* our trust in Christ daily. In this message 4.) We're going to look at how to keep coming to the true fountain. *How do we live a life-long lifestyle that continually finds life in God?*

I remember being impressed years ago by a study done by university professors and scientific researchers. The study showed that working harder at enjoying life made a huge difference in life. It was written up in a book *The Psychology of Gratitude*. What the study concluded was that most people don't make any effort at all to actively fill their daily experiences with greater joy, or hope. There were people who could list things they could be grateful for and enjoy but who weren't actually grateful and happy about those things because they didn't make *any* conscious effort to be. The study wasn't talking about people suffering from clinical depression and telling them to just be happy. It was addressing the everyday emotional life of everyday people on the whole. The study concluded this: "*In the absence of conscious efforts to engage, build, and sustain positive perceptions and emotions, we all too automatically fall prey to feelings such as irritation, anxiety, worry, frustration, self-doubt, and blame.*"¹ There was nothing uniquely Christian about that study, but it reveals a truth about how life works for all of us. It shows that even if you, as a child of God, believe that, in Jesus, you have forgiveness, purpose, his promise to work in your life and give you eternal life, without conscious effort to find life in that you will not. You will forget all God's benefits and blessings and respond and react to life emotionally unless you work at finding life, by faith, in Christ.

How do you make that conscious effort and keep doing it? We are going to keep it shortish and simple so here three things....

I. ONE WAY WE KEEP ON FINDING OUR LIFE IN CHRIST IS BY PRACTICING THE PRESENCE OF CHRIST.

In the midst of the prayer we just read from **Ephesians 3:17**, Paul says, *“I pray that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith.”*

When I was in college, I read a little book titled *The Practice of the Presence of God* by Brother Lawrence. He was a wounded soldier who became a spiritual mentor. He worked as a cook but decided to bring God’s presence into everything he did, cooking, washing dishes, talking with friends. His goal was to keep up a continual conscious connection with God – Christ dwelling in his heart by faith – every day in every thing. Our purpose as a church is to make disciples of Jesus. Disciples of Jesus follow him. That doesn't just mean you follow his teachings but that you live your life *with* him, in his presence.

A. Practicing the presence of Christ means communion and conversation with him.

If there were someone with you in the kitchen, in the car, at the workplace, you would talk with them. Practicing the presence of Christ means realizing Christ *is* with you. Throughout your day, you talk with Christ about everything. And you listen to him. **Colossians 3:16** says: *Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly.* The Bible is not just the record of what God said, once upon a time when, for a brief season, he was in a speaking mood. It is the living word of Christ for you and through it he gives life. It is possible that deep beneath the surface of all your interactions and engagements you can be in contact and communion with him. You may not do it perfectly – but you can learn to do it more and more consistently. I find that when I practice his presence like this, I receive grace and guidance. I smile more, even when facing hard or sad things. I love better, even with difficult people. I’m more patient and more productive. My heart is softer, and yet that softer heart is a stronger one; less brittle because he is with me. I am finding life in him.

B. To practice his presence and listen to him, you have to be unapologetically spiritually-minded.

Romans 8:6 *For to set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the*

mind on the Spirit is life and peace. We live in an age in which some Christians are more comfortable being skeptical than they are being spiritual. In a book titled *In Search of Guidance*, Dallas Willard asks: What if the way God works in us is so inward and gracious and even gentle at times – that it is very easy to ignore or even explain it away and pay it little attention? What if God wants us to so want relationship with him that we look and listen for his work in us and pay? If we don't really care or pay attention, if we are more predisposed to discount or explain away his working in us then perhaps we will have quenched the Spirit, and it will not be surprising that we have the self-satisfaction of knowing we are not gullible, but we will live with the emptiness of our skepticism. It takes a strong individualistic person to rebel against the tyranny of socially acceptable skepticism. It takes a person who has a deep desire for spiritual reality to choose to be a spiritual person and to live a spiritual life. We need to be - not just managers who juggle life's problems - but mystics who walk with Jesus. Not mystics in the sense of the Eastern religion, who seek oblivion in union with the cosmos, but mystics in the Christian sense that we live by faith and not by sight.

Open your heart to God and practice the presence of Christ. Then...

II. LET EACH DAY'S DEVELOPMENTS DRAW YOU CLOSER TO JESUS THROUGH HABITUAL REJOICING.

1 Thessalonians 5:16-18 says, *Rejoice always, ¹⁷ pray without ceasing, ¹⁸ give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.* This is often seen as a challenging verse. But it's actually a very helpful verse when it comes to finding life in Christ. Remember the research study that I mentioned in the beginning. Most people do not make an effort to do this. If you as a Christian make a conscious effort to practice this it will force you to let go of a lot of things and to learn to find life in Christ. To rejoice doesn't just mean, "try to be happy." The Bible always talks about rejoicing in the Lord. To *rejoice in the Lord* means to choose to make the Lord the central source of your joy in life.

Illustration: I remember once when I had memorized that verse, and it came to mind in the midst of a seriously bad mood. I looked at the floor and thought, "I do not feel like rejoicing. How can I rejoice now?" But the thought came with authority in my heart was this: "You can rejoice because you are rejoicing in the Lord. What you believe and know to be true about him and his promises is deeper than what you are feeling this moment. You can let go. You don't have to figure everything out. You can entrust your concerns to God and wait for him

to bring clarity and or resolution to every issue. And because you have a Father to whom you can entrust your concerns and your self you can rejoice in that right now.” At that moment, with my chest in a knot, I realized I didn't want to rejoice! *I wanted to be angry.* I didn't want to pray and give thanks and believe. I once heard someone say, *"Your emotions are a ticket to the here and now."* I think they were saying is that if you will pay attention to them, they give you access to the reality of your inner life in real-time. Then you have a choice to make. I felt compelled by the clarity of Scripture – God's word and my commitment to him to make that choice. So – this is what it felt like – I literally took a step forward that mirrored that step I was taking in my heart. And I discovered, only then, that I actually could. That knot in my chest came undone. The tightness loosened, my heart lifted, and instead of anger and sadness, there was real faith and hope and peace and trust. I remember that moment because I learned that we *can* rejoice in the Lord always If – "if" is the key – we will let go of our broken cisterns and misplaced and often entitled demands, and find our life in Christ.

Practice the presence of Christ and practice habitual rejoicing...

III. REMEMBER THAT THE LONG WALK IS PART OF THE GIFT.

Hebrews 12:1-2 *Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, ²looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.* Remembering that the Christian life is an endurance race can help us to keep coming to Christ to find life in him.

When I was young, I used to think, surely when you hit forty, you've got your wife, your kids, your house, your job, you've worked through all life's issues, and life becomes this big float trip down the lazy river of love and laughter. I should have paid more attention to the Bible stories. The Bible tells us we need endurance. We don't have to be controlled, much less defeated by the things that happen to us, but we cannot expect to just breeze through life without dealing with emotional challenges and carrying significant emotional burdens.

I love the story of the teacher in Africa who taught her students that when we give gifts at Christmas, we should do so in celebration of the amazing gift of love God has given us in Jesus. Soon after that, one of the young boys in the class disappeared for several days. When he

returned, he brought her a very rare seashell. She knew that for him to get that shell, he had walked by himself for several days to a specific part of the coast. He had to sleep out under the stars at night. It would have been difficult, dangerous, and scary. She told him: *You shouldn't have done this. That was a long, difficult journey for you.* And he looked at her and said: *The long walk is part of the gift.* Could you learn to see your life like that? To see your life and even the burdens you have to carry on the long walk, as part of the gift you offer to Christ for the grace he gives so freely to you? Could you decide to see that it is going to be a long walk, but that's okay? If so that can help you to keep coming to Christ and finding life in Him.

Conclusion

Christ offers himself to you not only as a Savior from Sin but as a source of life. Jesus reveals the nature and the love of God - that God cares and loves us even in all of our human flaws and our ugliest sins. This amazingly beautiful, holy, glorious God gave his perfect Son and God the Son, Jesus willingly came into our broken world in the power of God the Holy Spirit. And he gave himself for us.

He died to pay for our sins and rose again to be our Savior. He offers you grace, new life, salvation, forgiveness, eternity, and a relationship with him now as your ultimate and perfect Father. It's all grace – you don't and can't earn it – you just receive it the instant you turn to and trust in Jesus as your Savior. This is a Lord and Savior who is for you in all of life, and this is a God and father whose love, wisdom, care, and power you can trust. So don't just hear this, practice these things. Keep coming to Him, the true fountain. Make him your source of life.

Amen.

Prayer of Response

Lord Jesus Christ, the gift of your life in us and your presence with us is a gift of immeasurable value. The sacrificial love that brings us such grace is beyond our comprehension. And yet, I confess, I am too often, out of touch with and insensitive to these spiritual realities. Forgive my foolish, misguided, entitled, and demanding spirit. Help me to intentionally and continually practice your presence, rejoice in you, and offer you the gift of this life-long lifestyle of finding life in you. Amen.

¹ (Rollin McCraty, “The Grateful Heart,” *The Psychology of Gratitude*, ed. Robert A. Emmons [New York: Oxford University Press 2004], 241, *emphasis added*.)