

How to Make a Success of the Christian Life

by Dr. Manford George Gutzke

Some Christians have satisfaction and strength in their personal experience as believers in the Lord Jesus Christ. Their faith is sure. They have peace and quietness in heart and mind. They are free from bondage to appetite or desire. They have a certain joy of spirit that carries them through severe trials and dark days with strength. They have confidence in their assurance of God's care and Providence which enables them to stand fast in any evil time. While they endure all the sufferings of human experience just as other people do, they also are strong to withstand the peculiar temptations that always beset such as "will live godly in Christ Jesus." They live like Christians among other people. They are meek in dealing with men, and humble in their opinion of themselves. They are kind, liberal, and helpful to everyone, especially to the poor and the unfortunate. They are a comfort to their loved ones, a blessing to their friends, and an asset to the community in which they live.

This is undoubtedly the day by day aspect of salvation, promised in the gospel of Jesus Christ and offered unto all, "whosoever will." The Scriptures show that whereas the natural man is incapable of such living in his own strength, "whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord" can expect grace that "always causeth us to triumph in Christ." Thus it is possible to make a success of the Christian life. Christians are not without responsibility to take the steps that will lead to this fullness of blessing. No one need be entirely helpless in the matter, nor at a loss to know what to do. There are some simple conditions to be met, and some plain procedures to follow which will certainly bring the willing soul into the wonderful things "which God hath prepared for them that love him."

Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ As Your Personal Saviour

This is the first step, and in many ways the most important because it is so primary. It is essential to all that follows. The natural man is "dead in trespasses and sins," "is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be." "The carnal mind is enmity against God." "Ye must be born again." There can be no question as to the teaching of the Scriptures at this point.

It is to be feared that many persons earnestly wish to live as Christians who have never settled definitely and finally this matter of accepting Jesus Christ as their personal Saviour. Such persons can never make a success of the Christian life. When any man seeks to draw near to God, he begins to realize more and more that he is a sinner. Unless he *knows* that his sins are all taken away in Christ Jesus, his sense of guilt will grow day by day, and will stifle the love of God in his heart which alone can energize him to holy living. Strong devotion to God arises in gratitude to him for his free and final forgiveness. Anyone who fears the judgment day has not realized that Christ died for his sins, and he is afflicted with uncertainty and dread that weakens all his confidence and faith. Frightened hearts cannot be loyal. Fearful minds cannot be steadfast. This is a tragic condition that need not exist.

Anybody can know whether he has accepted Jesus Christ as his personal Saviour. When a man lifts his eyes to God, he becomes aware of his own personal shortcoming. Where, then, will he turn for assurance? Will he try to quiet his conscience by alibis, by rationalization, to say to himself that he is not really so very bad after all? Or will he seek support in his good deeds, his character, his gifts to charity, his church attendance, even in his Bible reading or in his praying? Such a man can never be a strong

Christian, because he cannot be sure of his standing with God. He is depending upon himself, his good works, his own righteousness. But will he turn to Christ on Calvary? Will he cling to "the old rugged Cross"? Will he cast himself upon the promises of God in Christ, and believe that God will forgive him and cleanse him for Christ's sake? This man knows his sins are forgiven, and rejoices in his free salvation "by the precious blood of the lamb." This man's heart will overflow in gratitude every time he comes to God face to face. "We love him, because he first loved us."

As long as, and as far as, honest men have a sense of responsibility for their own conduct, there will be the consciousness of personal unfitness before a holy God. Any time, anywhere, anybody accepts Jesus Christ as his personal Saviour, his iniquity is pardoned, his sins are forgiven, his transgressions are taken away. The prisoner is set free. The soul is quickened and raised from the dead. The man is born again. "The Spirit itself beareth witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God."

When any man knows for sure that God has forgiven and redeemed him for Christ's sake, that he "shall not come into condemnation, but is passed from death unto life," his heart, in gratitude and love, turns to God as a flower turns to the sun. He grows strong in the grace which is in Christ Jesus. He becomes ambitious to be well-pleasing to God. "In quietness and in confidence" he goes from strength to strength. The peace of God that passeth understanding guards his heart and mind in Christ Jesus. In believing, he "rejoices with joy unspeakable and full of the Holy Ghost."

This Christian will grow. This Christian will serve. This Christian will be eager to learn. This Christian is inclined from within to do all things in the name of the Lord Jesus. The secret of much weakness in many Christians is right here at the outset. Many sincere persons unfortunately are not sure they have been redeemed. Many do not even know that they could be sure. They have little joy. They have little peace. They have little strength. They have little love for God and little loyalty to Christ. Such persons are not even sure that they "belong" in the Kingdom. These can never be triumphant, victorious Christians. If a man cannot believe, or does not believe, that Christ died for him personally, and has surely delivered him from his sins, he cannot believe other promises of God which are made to those who do so believe. And if he cannot believe God, he certainly cannot be a success in Christian living. Uncertainty here at the foundation will forever weaken the whole structure of character and life.

After all, the Christian life is a life lived in the grace of Jesus Christ. Nothing can possibly be so basic and important as a man's trust in his Saviour and Lord. It is altogether fitting and proper, therefore, that we should lay all emphasis at just this point. This is the beginning. If a man starts right, he has a fair chance of reaching the goal. To believe in Jesus Christ as one's personal Saviour is to make the right start toward making a success of the Christian life.

Believing in the Lord Jesus Christ as one's personal Saviour, and receiving Him as Lord, involves the coming of the Holy Spirit into the heart. There is much to be said here because so much needs to be learned. But space forbids further elaboration at this time. Let it be enough to say that God Himself sends forth the Holy Spirit into the hearts of believers to enable them to live and grow in the things of Christ. The Christian does have a part to perform in this spiritual relationship with the indwelling God. He must yield to the Spirit in willing obedience, as unto his living Lord, "for it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure."

Confess Your Faith in Jesus Christ Before Men

"Let the redeemed of the Lord say so." This second step is to be closely associated with the first, and is really involved in it. Doubtless many cannot be sure they have taken the first, because they have never taken the second. Perhaps it is possible to be a "secret believer," but one can be very sure that no secret believer ever became a strong Christian. There is something salutary and vitalizing about an open

identification with Jesus Christ before men. Secret marriages are not satisfactory nor healthy in any respect. The love of the heart thrives best when it is expressed. There is something furtive about all secret arrangements of any sort, and in the case of a person's relation to Christ it is positively weakening to keep that a hidden thing.

The fact of the matter is that many people in every community have rejected Jesus Christ, and are living now in more or less conscious rebellion against God. Because of this estrangement there is hostility to Jesus Christ latent in popular feeling. Such persons feel an unreasonable resentment when any soul ventures to speak a word of praise or testimony for Jesus Christ. Consideration of doctrines, programs, ideas, will be tolerated far beyond any personal reference to Him. Yet our Christian life originates in Him personally. To neglect or to avoid our personal relation to Him is to weaken ourselves sadly at the very source of grace and power. The prospect of facing resentment and displeasure need not be minimized. It will ever be a test of the integrity of our own convictions and of the sincerity of our personal committal to Him. The Christian needs to realize that Christ Jesus Himself faced such "contradiction of sinners," and that "the servant is not greater than his lord." It is quite possible that every Christian will learn in his own experience in some measure that "in this world ye shall have tribulation," but he can be wonderfully comforted by the further word of the Lord, "but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world."

Our human personalities are directly affected by the experiences we have with other men. Opposition tries but often strengthens our purpose. When a man is once committed in public there are many influences that contrive to confirm him in his stand. This is especially true in matters of loyalty. When our own flag is hoisted in a foreign land, there is a definite challenge to the exercise of all the personal loyalty and love of country that can possibly be lurking within us. Friendships are permanently cemented when we are associated together in some common distress inflicted upon us by an unsympathetic public.

Many Christians would be stronger if only they had to suffer something for Christ's name's sake. It puts iron in the blood of a young Christian to be ridiculed for his faith. To show one's colors in a hostile atmosphere requires courage, but it begets confidence. Important vitamins for spiritual life are derived from exposure to the pitiless glare of a searching public gaze. The man who says he is a Christian will be expected to act like one, and it is remarkable how one is challenged to live up to the expectations of others.

The simplest and most meaningful procedure in which this step can be definitely taken is that of joining the local church. No one could misunderstand the significance of this act. Whatever the name of Christ may mean in the community, the church stands in that name before the public. When a person joins the church, everybody knows what he means by that act. Such a man believes what that church believes, and stands for what that church stands for. There are other ways of confessing faith in Christ, some of which will be suggested below, but this is always the usual normal, typical thing to do.

To make a success of the Christian life it is important to confess faith in Christ wherever one lives. In the home, in the office, in the school, among the crowd, at the club, in short – wherever one has contacts. For this, uniting with the local church will serve, but may not be enough. Attending church services on Sunday, especially on Sunday evening, will generally be accepted as a sign of one's faith in Christ. Certainly attending midweek prayer services would be a sure sign for anybody who noticed it. Carrying a Bible speaks its own message very clearly.

As formal as all this may seem, and as inconclusive as to inner reality it may be, all such open association of one's own person with the name and gospel of Jesus Christ is very important to one's own spiritual experience. There is a definite promise, "Whosoever therefore shall confess me before men, him will I confess also before my Father who is in heaven." It is important that we recognize that no matter how sincere a man's faith may be in his own heart, he cannot grow into robust Christian experience without open confession of his personal relation to Jesus Christ. "Let us go forth therefore unto him

without the camp, bearing his reproach."

With these two related steps taken, other developments in promoting Christian life follow as a matter of course. Both inspiration and energy will arise from within a believing and confessing heart. No one can ever be a strong, satisfied Christian who has not completed these two initial steps that attach him to Christ personally and associate him with Christ before the eyes of the world.

Read the Bible

The Bible is God's Word. God has promised to bless it to the benefit of our spiritual experience. Christian living is by faith, and "faith cometh by hearing and hearing by the Word of God." It has pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe, and "this is the word which by the gospel is preached unto you."

So often precious time and interest is exhausted in attempting to explain the Bible so that it will seem reasonable to natural minds. The result is a widespread feeling that, unless one can explain the Bible, one cannot believe it, which in turn discourages the reading of the Bible until one can understand it! How often we have smiled at the ridiculous admonition, "Don't go into the water until you know how to swim." There are many similar attitudes fostered by unwise and impractical attempts to know all about how the Bible was written, what the local and the personal conditions were under which it was written, which is the proper interpretation of this or that obscure passage, etc. The net result is that for many, many people the Bible remains a closed book. In all sincerity they do not read the Bible because they "could never know enough to understand it"!

Confidence in the Bible is achieved just as one acquires confidence in a person: by living with it. Reading the Bible begets faith and assurance, not in the Bible only, but in the Lord of whom the Bible speaks. Where the Bible is, Christians are found. Where the Bible is not, nor ever has been, Christians are never found. Christians who read the Bible grow strong, sure and established. Christians who do not read the Bible do not grow, are easily discouraged and shaken, and remain weak in faith. If a person cannot read for himself, he may receive many of the benefits by listening to others who do read the Bible. Much more could be elaborated here, but the point could scarcely be made more obvious. If any believer wants to make a success of the Christian life, Bible reading must have a definite place in his personal procedures. Bible-reading, Bible-believing, Bible-loving Christians grow in grace and knowledge: they become strong, fruitful Christians. "Blessed is he that readeth . . ."

Pray

This practice is so commonly respected that it would seem superfluous to commend it by any extended remarks. But a few words are in order by way of noting that, however much "praying" may be esteemed, there are few Christians who practice it much. It has been remarked that there is probably no other exercise of which so much is said in comparison to so little that is done. It will suffice our purpose to emphasize here that praying is of the very essence of Christian living. Certainly if any believer wants to make a success of the Christian life he must practice praying. "More things are wrought by prayer than this world dreams of."

God has conditioned important benefits upon prayer. "Ask, and ye shall receive." The pity in so many weak and impoverished Christians' experiences is that they "have not" because they "ask not." God only knows how many burdened, worn pastors are wearing away in their service because they have neglected praying. Spiritual power always has and always will come from prayer. "I will yet . . . be

enquired of by the house of Israel, to do it for them."

In many things God waits for us to pray, and certainly in this matter of growing in Christian life and strength, prayer is absolutely essential. Although this practice is listed fourth in our analysis, it is also placed in the very center. There is a peculiar fitness to this position. There is a direct relation between what goes before and what comes after, but that relation is maintained and developed in prayer. Anybody can pray. Everybody who wants to grow as a Christian must pray. It is just as simple and just as profound as that. It is impossible to conceive of a strong Christian who doesn't pray. And praying can be deliberately undertaken and developed in any Christian life. "Praying always . . . and watching thereunto with all perseverance."

Keep the Sabbath Day

This practice has been chosen for emphasis because of its own significance, but in reality it is but an outstanding procedure among many in which men may honor God. The human heart is so prone to forget, especially in matters of spiritual nature. This world is so near to each of us. The cares and the pleasures of daily living tend to engross our hearts and minds to a point where we neglect the things of God. Careful Christians may wisely maintain daily worship of God, by including such periods as the family altar, the quiet hour, in their own daily programs. But there is something distinctly impressive about interrupting current routine for a whole day once in every seven days.

Everybody knows what "the Lord's day" is and pretty well knows what it means. There may be difficulty in defining to outward precision just how Sunday should be observed in matters of conduct, but there need be no confusion about the importance of setting that day aside as "unto the Lord." It will serve our immediate purpose to point out that no Sabbath-breaker ever becomes a godly man. The implication cannot be obscured. Christians may worship God sincerely every day, but there never was a strong, fruitful Christian who did not "remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy."

The blessings that follow this practice are so remarkable that it is always a wonder that our generation of Christians has tolerated such slipshod treatment of Sunday as the Lord's day. There is scarcely anything a family can do which makes such a marked impression on a growing child's mind as to make Sunday a "different" day. Children who grow up in homes that "keep" Sunday, invariably have a strong sense of the reality of God. Neither is there any better way to maintain a quiet but powerful testimony for God in the neighborhood. We all notice the behavior of those around us. When a man "won't do" certain things on Sunday, just because it is Sunday, he need say very little to explain why. Everybody feels he is a believer. And he will feel that way himself. Men respond to the effect of a uniform, not only in dress but also in conduct. The ordering of one's whole life can be definitely advanced by this practical procedure of setting aside Sunday. The other days of the week are more easily managed when the first day is reserved for God.

So definitely is this true, we should recognize that any man engaged in work that requires Sunday work is under a distinct spiritual handicap. A Sunday worker can be a real Christian, but only with special effort. All who care for his soul should regularly pray for him. He will need to follow special procedures of personal worship, Bible reading, prayer, etc., if he means to grow in the grace of God. It can be done, but it will take extra care. When thinking of the Christians who carelessly squander their Sunday opportunities, one is both grieved and alarmed over the inevitable consequences. Family, community, and nation are directly blessed when the Sabbath is observed. No Christian has ever become strong and sure in his faith who neglected to honor God on the Lord's day.

Give

"The liberal soul shall be made fat." "God loveth a cheerful giver." Generosity in giving to others, liberality in giving to the Lord's work, are directly related to all that strengthens and develops a Christian. This matter of giving is not so easily understood in its significance for healthy spiritual life as the observance of Sabbath is, but in reality it is very similar in its nature. The principle of "the separated portion" is basic to each. One seventh of one's time and one tenth of one's income was the historic Biblical proportion. Jacob vowed to give one tenth of all his material income by way of registering his conviction that all he ever would receive would come from God.

The New Testament epistles do not stress the Sabbath nor the tithe, but the significance of regularity and order in worship and in service cannot be seriously doubted. Christians are primarily responsible to follow the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and there are numerous instances in history where men have given all they had directly to the help of others and the service of God. But there seems to be no sound basis for questioning the tithe as a minimum proportion to serve as a guide in the practice of giving. Yet the importance of giving is not a matter of whether one should give a certain amount, but that the believer should give, should give liberally, and should give "as unto the Lord."

Here again, the benefits that accrue to the Christian are so impressive it is hard to understand why intelligent believers do not all "abound in the grace also." There seems to be plenty of evidence that material blessing does come to those who are liberal, yet the ways of Providence prevent any undeniable conclusion at this point. This may well suggest that here is not the real consideration to be noted. When we focus attention upon the spiritual benefits, the judgment is plain and strong: no stingy person ever prospered in Christian experience. It is as true that a strong Christian is a liberal, generous, charitable person. We need to consider that it is not so much that he is liberal because he is a strong Christian as it is that he has grown to be a strong Christian because of his liberality. We know that "faith without works is dead," and in this matter of giving we may see that it is *the faith that works* which is found in any strong Christian experience.

One further word may well be added to note the influence of giving to the Lord upon others, especially the young. Children are prone to accept the estimates and judgments of parents and older members of the family. Even very young children quickly learn to appreciate the difference in the value of coins and "folding money." Children watch their parents. When a boy sees that his father pays out "real money" again and again for amusement and pleasure, while he contributes "pennies" and "loose change" to church and Sunday school, that boy is *learning* how to low rate everything about God. It may sound paltry to some, but human nature being what it is, this is soberly true: the measure of a man's giving is a direct index to the strength of his faith. And further, it is a sure prophecy of the future of his experience. The negative side of this truth is most serious. The Scriptures seem to teach that if a man will not give, he is in danger of losing benefits and blessings he has already enjoyed. There is every reason to think if a man will not heed the cry of the poor, God will not hear him when he prays.

The bearing of these observations upon our own problem of how to make a success of the Christian life is very plain indeed. God will bless believers in all things that they may have the means to enjoy and to serve the Lord. If a Christian will control his own selfish indulgence and greed, and will resolutely set aside a definite portion to be used as "the Lord's money," he will be richly blessed in every good thing. Thus a man may lay up "treasures in heaven" by a liberal and charitable use of "the unrighteous mammon." Many questions of specific practice may remain obscure, but there need be no doubt that the Christian who gives will be the Christian who lives.

Many other aspects of Christian living could doubtless be stressed to advantage, but the above have been chosen as basic lines of procedure. More will unfold as the believer follows along the steps sketched thus far. Just as the first two are initial steps with continuous implications, so the next four are

general procedures to be followed constantly. One more recommendation will be made by way of directing practical activities into which the Christian will be led, and through which he will prosper and grow.

Work in Church

What has been said above may well serve as a complete and adequate program from the point of view of inner personal decision and purpose. But there is a very definite benefit to one's own Christian life which comes from participating in the combined corporate activities that Christians promote together. God will give particular grace to every believer to serve in the church in some capacity.

Every congregation is led by a group of faithful workers, who voluntarily accept responsibility to "do something" in the local church program. Usually these people are the "good Christians" in the church. Often we think they work because they are "good," even though they say that is not so. Should we not say they are "good" because they work? Exercise is directly beneficial to health and strength. Sometimes a pastor may feel regret that every grown person in the church isn't a Sunday school teacher; they are such a fine group of strong helpful Christians. And which teacher will deny that it was his teaching that proved such a blessing to his own soul?

Here is one of the major problems in these days of large congregations. So many Christians belong to churches that do not have any adequate program of activities that will place some meaningful responsibility upon each willing member. Being faithful in the home, reliable in the community, and virtuous in personal character are all important, and are pleasing to God, and are all related to genuine Christian living. But there is a distinct spiritual blessing in doing something definite and regular in the witnessing program of the Church.

In the meantime, no Christian need stand idly by while some others do the necessary things. To invite persons to church; to take responsibility to see that the neighbors' children get to Sunday school; to bring prospective church members to the pastor; to carry one's own part in singing, in responsive reading, in united prayer; to accept assignment for visiting the sick; to volunteer for work at special occasions for special tasks, are various possibilities that may suggest still others that would appear in the local church. There is always work for willing hands to do. What one does will surely help others, but we are noting just now that it will certainly help himself. The inner spiritual life will be distinctly advanced whenever a Christian works in the church.

What shall we say then, brethren? As desirable and as wonderful as it would be to grow and prosper in Christian living, it is also just that practical and possible. We are to be co-workers with God. Every blessing we shall ever have, we shall receive from Him. But God has designed that we shall grow and become fruitful as we exercise ourselves in faith and in wisdom. Any Christian can make a success of the Christian life. When we consider how it will please the Lord, glorify His name, bring blessing to others, help our loved ones, and satisfy our own hearts, shall we not follow the plain paths that lead to the end we have in mind? It can be done. We can do it. "If God be for us, who can be against us?" Let us arise and go forward.