

Community Church of Issaquah

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12 Life Lessons to Practice

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Modern day technology is something I cannot seem to master. Computers, cell phones, tablets, Apple watches. . . I could go on and on, but you must know what I'm talking about. I stood in line behind a young woman one time at a HomeGoods store. She was buying items for her dorm room in preparation for the new school term. When the cashier had scanned all her items and totaled them, she told the young woman the amount and asked how she wanted to pay. "Google pay," she said and then leaned her watch to the credit card scanner and boom, she got a receipt. She paid with her watch! What ever happened to writing a check or paying with cash? Life has changed in many ways, hasn't it?

Then as I began to think about the message I am delivering today, "12 Life Lessons to Practice," I found myself smiling. Do you remember years ago when we would be asked for a definition or meaning of something and we would go immediately to our dictionary or to the encyclopedia for an answer? Back in those days, every student had their own copy of the dictionary and every family had a set of encyclopedias in their home. I don't want to make you sad, but those don't exist anymore except in libraries.

Today, we “Google it” or go online to Wikipedia and type in what we’re searching for, and up pops an answer on screen.

When I looked up the definition of ‘who is a ‘Christian,’ on Wikipedia, this is what came to my computer screen:

Christians are people who follow or adhere to Christianity, a monotheistic Abrahamic religion based on the life and teachings of Jesus Christ.

Boy, that sounds technical to me.

And then if you Google it, this is the answer:

A Christian is someone who believes in Jesus Christ and follows his teachings.

That makes it sound so simple, doesn’t it? Do you remember that verse from Acts 16 verse 31 that says,

They replied, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved--you and your household."

For most of my life as a Christian I have understood that the true meaning of being labeled a “Christian” is that we simply believe that Jesus was the Christ, the Son of God who came to earth to die for our sins and rose again to give us new life and the promise of life eternal. That concept has become so much more complicated for me in my later years. In the past few years, the word “Christian” has gained such a negative image in our society and often I have felt like I needed to apologize for being one. I recently post the message “I am a woke Christian and proud of it” on my Facebook page and had over a hundred people comment or click a positive note. Strange to call yourself a “woke Christian,” isn’t it. But it sure beats being called a “Christian Nationalist.”

When I saw church going people who claimed to be Christian taking children away from refugee and immigrant parents and then caging them simply because they were trying desperately to find a safe home country, I was furious. When I read about terrorists who would attack mosques and burn the homes of Muslim families, I shook my head in disbelief. When I see or hear politicians who claim to be Christians but forbid schools to teach about the history of slavery because it makes Whites look bad, I wonder who told them that? And when I heard of a pastor in Boise who told his congregation that the government should shoot and kill every gay person because that's what Jesus wants, I was shocked and disappointed. I was equally disappointed that I did not hear any other ministers speak out against that. In our world today, the meaning of 'Christian' has been so damaged by peoples' actions and difficult for us to understand.

Christians who say they believe in Christ as Savior are certainly plentiful. We are divided by denominations and sects that focus not on belief in Christ but how we are to implement that belief into everyday life. When I heard that there are more than 147 varieties of Baptist alone, I began to wonder what are the founding principles of these churches. Looking back at my own beginnings with the Southern Baptist Church, it was painful to learn that this branch of Christianity had been founded to support slavery and oppose abolition of it. Yet, I was sure that those in my church all believed in Jesus as Lord and were Christians. I continued to ask myself, "Is it enough just to believe? Is that all there is to being a Christian?"

Today we ask the question, “What Does It Mean to Be a Christian?” The answer to that is that we follow the instructions Jesus taught not only his disciples but those who left their old faith traditions and chose to believe in Jesus as the promised Messiah. What were the instructions that Jesus gave us? If we were to make a list, it would be our “to do” list that we should follow but often find that difficult to do.

Here are just a few:

- ❖ Love God with all your heart, mind and soul.
- ❖ Love your neighbor as much as you love yourself regardless where they come from.
- ❖ Do unto others as you would want them to do to you.
- ❖ Love your enemies.
- ❖ Forgive those who offend you.
- ❖ Feed the hungry.
- ❖ Care for the poor.
- ❖ Visit the imprisoned.

There are many, many more that we as Christians are expected to honor and obey, tucked away in our Bibles.

So, if God prepared a report card for you to see how you have done with this and more, what grade would God give you? What grade would you give yourself? I’m not your teacher today, so I won’t be handing out report cards, but I want us to think about how we float from these specific mandates of Jesus and how we live our lives today. I know we try to be very faithful in our Christian lives, and I believe God sees that and will reward us for that when we meet. But our following these and other teachings is our

spiritual journey. We are all on that road working hard to do our best.

There's another side to our lives – our practical everyday life. It is how we intertwine our spiritual lessons with the lesson we must learn to have a life that is reflective of who we are and what we want to do in life. I'd like to share some common and wise words about life in general and life specifically for us as we move along the age calendar.

1. **"Life is a journey, not a destination."**: Embrace the present and savor each moment.
2. **"Age is just a number."**: Your experiences and wisdom are your greatest assets.
3. **"Never stop learning."**: Embrace new challenges and continue growing throughout life.
4. **"Kindness matters."**: Offer compassion and support to those around you.
5. **"Forgive and let go."**: Releasing past hurts can bring peace and freedom.
6. **"Stay active."**: Engage your mind and body to maintain vitality.
7. **"Connect with loved ones."**: Nurture relationships and find joy in companionship.
8. **"Embrace change."**: Life is constantly evolving, so be open to new possibilities.
9. **"Find your purpose."**: Continue pursuing passions and making a difference.
10. **"Live in the moment."**: Focus on the present and appreciate the simple joys.
11. **"Practice gratitude."**: Acknowledge the good in your life and express appreciation.

12. **"Be yourself.":** Celebrate your unique experiences and wisdom.

Can you see how these lessons can be woven into the other Biblical lessons we teach as we honor Christ?

There is a passage from Acts 10 and the beginning of that says, "I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right." This tells us that there is an important step in living out our belief in Christ – doing what is right. I like to think of it as the two B words – Believe and Behave. When we believe in Christ and become a follower or Christian, we are responsible for our actions.

I wrote an article for a magazine one time about the concept of being a "cosmetic Christian." It was a deeply personal article for me because it was about me. I came to realize a few years ago that so much of how I had lived out my life as a Christian was more cosmetic rather than authentic. I had thought I was doing the right thing but found that sometimes I was doing what I thought others would like me to do and what would make me look good.

As I sat in church a few years back, it dawned on me that so many of those attending the service had come with the same unconscious intent – to be on our best behavior. We had taken time to dress "appropriately" and to behave "correctly" so that those we encounter will hopefully find some visible evidence of our deep spirituality. We could be easily recognized as a Christian. We stood as we sang

hymns whose story and meaning I had heard but never learned what they meant. We bowed our heads in reverence as someone reads a well-written prayer displaying their gift for weaving theological words and thoughts into a spoken text worthy of inclusion in scripture.

But it went even deeper than that for me. I had dressed the part of a well-respected minister with my clerical collar, robe and the correct colored stole faithful to the church liturgical calendar. I had relished the name given to me as “Pastor Vincent” as though that name plate carried with it the recognition of my near sainthood. I read Scripture from a variety of translations to signify I was truly a scholar and a seminary star pupil. I was clear to make known the fact that I did not drink or smoke, though these had no connection to my life as clergy but were hold-overs from being the son of a smoking alcoholic and my painful memories of growing up in that homelife I wanted to hide. I made sure I flinched when anyone used even a hint of a curse word because proper clergy should always do that and Proverbs says, “A word fitly spoken. . .” I was, in truth, a cosmetic Christian.

I realized that I did not want to be a cosmetic Christian and do right simply to please others. I wanted to live as a true Christian, but this was an awakening I had never expected. Now let me move away from my story and back to the concept of behaving as a Christian. The Bible says, “by their fruits you will know them.” If we are committed followers of Christ, we are called to behave as He did, to love others, to be active in making the world a better place,

to witness to others, and to do what is right. Not for any other reason than it is what being a Christian means – behaving like Christ.

So how do we know if someone is a Christian? How do we recognize a person as a follower of Jesus? Can we look at a person and automatically say, “Oh yeah, for sure. She’s a believer.” Or “I’m pretty sure that guy is a Christian. He’s always so nice.” It’s not possible to put a label on someone simply by looking at them. Too many people today categorize Christians only as White Americans. There is nothing further from the message we heard in the Scripture today. “God does not show favoritism but accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right.”

So, we’ve come full circle here. We’re back to the question, What Life Lessons Have I learned and Practice? In truth, there is no one answer to that question. The more important question for each of us is this, “What does it mean for **me** to be a Christian? How many rules of Christ do I follow in my life?” For me, I simply want to strive to be an authentic Christian who believes in Christ and who works my fingers to the bone to do what Jesus taught us to do. I want to strive as a believer to behave and do the right thing always. That’s what it means to me to be a Christian. But each of us needs to answer that question for ourselves. Let us be determined to boldly say, “I’m a Christian and I want to live it and show it. I try with my life to follow the rules and lessons of Jesus.”