

**Sermon preached at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church, Kingstowne, Virginia,
by Pastor David Fischler, on Sunday, June 24, 2012**

GROWING CHRIST'S WAY

Psalm 119:33-40; Acts 18:24-28

I would love to be a baby again. Anybody here agree with me? Come on, think about it. When you're a baby you have no responsibilities. You have no bills. You have no morning or evening commute. You don't have a boss or a superior officer telling you what to do. Mothers don't do that. Think about it. When you're a baby all you've got to worry about is eating, sleeping and... well, you know, that other. And even when that happens there's somebody there to clean it up. When you're an adult you have to take care of your own messes. When you're a baby somebody else does it. Have I been persuasive yet? This sounds good, doesn't it? Wouldn't we all like to remain infants? Isn't that what so many people who call themselves Christians want in life? They want to remain infants. Because as long as they're infants in Christ they think they have no responsibilities, they have nothing to be accountable for, and life is easy. We all know that's not true. And as attractive as infancy might be, when we're in the midst of all the complications of our lives, the fact of the matter is, as has been definitively proved here this morning, very few if any of us would want to go back. And we all know why, too. Even with the bills and the bosses and the commutes and the disappointments and the difficult relationships life is a lot more interesting, life is a lot more meaningful, life is a lot fuller as an adult than it is as an infant.

When I was growing up I remember waiting for certain milestones. Did you do that? When I was four, I couldn't wait to be five because I could go to school. I wanted to do that. I really wanted to turn ten because there seemed to be some kind of difference when you moved from single to double digits. That was a big deal. I really looked forward to being thirteen, because at that point I was no longer a pre-teen. I was no longer a little kid. I was a teenager. I knew that I was just entering those years when I could give my parents the most possible grief. Being a teenager was something to look forward to. I looked forward to turning seventeen because in New Jersey that was when you could get a driver's license. At that point I was really dangerous. I looked forward to turning eighteen because at that point I could vote. I was a political science major in college and I couldn't wait to cast my ballot and choose between the lesser of two evils. I know everyone really waits with baited breath to do that. I couldn't wait to turn twenty-one because then, despite the fact that I'd given it up when I was sixteen, I could drink legally. I'm not sure why that was so important, but it was.

All of those marks along the way – I'm not looking forward to them as much now as I used to. The next significant thing is that I turn fifty-five and become eligible for AARP membership. No, wait a minute, that's fifty. I've passed that. What's at fifty-five? Oh, yes, the senior discount for coffee. It just doesn't seem quite so exciting.

The truth is that growth of the sort that is marked by those kinds of milestones is part of what being a Christian is about, too. The call to us to grow, to go past infancy and

spiritual childhood and pre-teenager, and adolescence and finally to grow into adulthood and mature in the fullness of the stature of Christ and all that is laid upon every single one of us. It may be tempting to remain in the younger stages of that journey, but as wonderful as I would like to think spiritual adulthood is, though I still have a way to go to reach the full measure of the stature of Christ, I can assure you that life is much more interesting, much more fulfilling and much more meaningful as a spiritual adult than it was as a spiritual infant.

Scripture offers a number of ways that happens, but one of the ways I want to focus on for this morning is one that we start to hear of in Psalm 119. These eight verses might be a lure to teachers. Each of the verses begins with a different letter of the Hebrew alphabet and each of them has a somewhat different focus. If you read through Psalm 119 you may have found yourself thinking that it is awfully repetitive. But in fact each of these verses has a somewhat different focus. In this one it is the Lord who teaches us and it is we who respond to that teaching. In verse 33, the psalmist states the theme of those eight verses: “Teach me, O LORD.” We’ll get to what in just a moment. The psalmist asks the Lord to teach him. That’s another way of saying that he wants God to reveal Himself. Not just a set of laws or precepts or statutes or commandments. There are a dozen different ways they’re referred to in this psalm. But not just a code of conduct. He wants the Lord to teach him about who He is and how the psalmist is supposed to relate to Him. That’s really important and will become more obvious as we go a bit farther. It’s something really important to always keep in mind whenever the Scripture speaks of itself or its contents in particular, when it speaks of God’s laws or commands, that what it is talking about is a means to an end, not an end to itself. We don’t keep the commands as an end of themselves. We don’t keep the commands because it’s a good thing to do. We keep the commands because of our relationship with the One who gave them. We keep the commands because we want to please the commander. We keep the law, to the extent that we keep the law, not to win His favor, not in order to prove ourselves to Him, but simply because we want to please the Lord. Not for any reward that accrues to us because of it, but simply because we want to please Him. All of which is to say that when the psalmist throughout this psalm speaks of the law, or commands, or statutes, or precepts, what he’s really talking about ultimately is our relationship with the Lord who stands behind all of that.

Now he prays this way for a couple of reasons. One is that he knows that that relationship is impossible without the Lord taking the initiative. It is God who reveals Himself, not we who find Him. I’ve heard the analogy before that our search for God is like looking for a light switch in a dark room and we feel around because we need to turn on the light in order to be able to see God. I want you to think about the analogy in a slightly different way. We’re in a dark room, yes, but the room is the size of North America and you know that there is a light switch somewhere within that room. And you have to find it. What you don’t know is that the light switch is in a tiny town in the middle of nowhere in central Nebraska and you are stuck in the subway in New York City and everything is dark. And you have to search an entire continent to find that light switch. What do you think the odds are that you’ll find it? What are the odds that you’ll get out of the subway, much less find the light switch? That’s the position that we’re in

with regard to God. Our search for God is pointless. Our search for God is fruitless. It is He who has to show Himself to us. Part of the reason for that is because – and the psalmist knows this very well – his sin and our sin stands in the way of our being able to find God. He says in verses 36-37, “Turn my heart toward Your statutes and not toward selfish gain.”

Turn my eyes away from worthless things because that’s where we naturally look. That’s what our eyes are drawn to, the stuff of the world, the stuff that the world values. I read something earlier this week – and please don’t ask me why I was reading this, because it’s one of those instances of my eyes being drawn to something worthless – about Kim Kardashian. It was actually a story from the *Daily Telegraph* in London about a headmistress of a school who was bemoaning the fact that so many people are so fascinated with this young woman who has accomplished absolutely nothing in the course of her life, demonstrated no talents except for self-promotion, and has done nothing to be lifted up as a role model. I got to the end of that story and I agreed with her. I think that’s probably a fair judgment to render on Miss Kardashian’s lifetime achievement. Then I found myself wondering why I read this. What possible reason could I have had for reading this? My eye was drawn to worthless things and it stands in the way of our relationship with God and knowing and understanding Him.

So the psalmist asked the Lord to teach him. But in verse 33 he goes a little farther than that and specifically says that he wants the Lord to teach him to follow His decrees. The English Standard Version says, “Teach me the way of Your statutes.” The psalmist knew that it’s not enough to know the Word. It’s absolutely necessary, but it’s not enough to simply know it. We all know what the New Testament says about that. It says that even the devil can quote Scripture. Even the devil knows who Jesus is. Even the devil knows what the truth of the gospel is, and what’s his response? He rejects it. He certainly doesn’t live by it. So the psalmist makes clear that what he wants to know is not just the commands of God, the law of God, the precepts of God, the statutes of God. He wants to know the way, which is to say the way that comes from living and more importantly the life that is lived in God and a relationship with God as a result of following Him. So it is that in verses 34-35, he asks for two things that are required to be able to have that life. First he says in verse 34, “Give me understanding and I will keep Your law and obey it with all my heart.” Anyone can memorize and quote Scripture. Anyone can use a concordance, look things up, and point to a verse and say, that’s the answer.

In my Sunday School class for the last several weeks we’ve been looking at Jehovah’s Witnesses and examining the ways, sometimes very peculiar ways, in which they use Scripture. Sometimes they change it because it doesn’t support preconceived notions. Sometimes they manipulate it. Sometimes they bend and twist it and take things out of context. One of the most famous and well-known to the public instances of that is their quotation of passages in Scripture that refer to the eating of blood that they then use as their justification for their refusal to receive blood transfusions. Those two things have nothing to do with one another. In fact, a member of the Watchtower Society quoted to me passages that prohibit the eating of blood in the Old Testament and even the reference in Acts 15 of the Jerusalem council. It doesn’t matter in the slightest because

they completely misunderstood what those verses are about. They ripped them out of the context not only of the Scripture they are in, but out of the context of the relationship of us with God that they are meant to foster. The eating of blood has to do with the shed blood of Christ, His blood being our life, our life given to us through His sacrifice. So we're prohibited from eating blood because of its association with life. That's not quite what a blood transfusion is about.

That's just one instance. There are lots of others that could be cited. But the point is that the psalmist doesn't just want to know the law or the Word, he wants to understand it. The other thing that he mentions in verse 35 is, "Direct me in the path of Your commands for there I will find delight." In other words, don't just show me the words, give me direction. It is the Spirit of God that ultimately must be at work in our life if we're to overcome the inclination of sin that he then goes on to talk about in verse 36-37. He knows that he can't do that. That's why he prays, "Lord, turn my heart away from selfish gain; turn my eyes away from worthless things." Could I do that in my own power? No. Not if that's all I was relying on. Can I do that in the power of God with His direction? Yes, I can do that, because it is ultimately He who does that and who inclines me in that direction. So what the Lord desires, then, is what we can say with the psalmist. What he says in verse 40 is, "How I long for your precepts." Not because he wants to be a great lawyer, or a great Scripture scholar. Not because he wants to be known as a smart guy. Not because he wants to be known as pious and religious. "Preserve my life in Your righteousness." He longs for the commandments of God, he longs for His precepts because he knows that it is there that the Lord will preserve him, and will preserve him in righteousness, which is to say He will preserve him in a right relationship with the God who gives those commands.

So this is perhaps the most important aspect of our growing in God. We move past spiritual infancy, through adolescence, into adulthood with the ultimate goal of maturity. The primary way that we do that is through God's Word and through His using it to strengthen and deepen our relationship with Him. We long for His precepts that we might know Him better and that we might walk in His ways as a response to His love.

What I'd like to do is transpose that into a New Testament context and for that we take a look at Acts 18. Here we have an interesting story that involves three people, Priscilla, Aquila, and Apollos. Priscilla and Aquila were companions of Paul. At the beginning of this chapter we're told that after this, Paul left Athens and went to Corinth where he met a Jew named Aquila in an area which is now Turkey, who had recently come from Italy with his wife, Priscilla, because Claudius ordered all the Jews to leave Rome. Paul went to see them because he was a tentmaker, as they were. He stayed and worked with them. Every Sabbath he reasoned at the synagogue, trying to persuade Jews and Greeks. At some point, Priscilla and Aquila became not only Jews but followers of the Jewish Messiah, Jesus Christ. They then traveled with Paul from Corinth and went on to Ephesus, a town also in what is now modern Turkey. There Priscilla and Aquila came across a man by the name of Apollos. He was, as it turns out, also Jewish, but he was an eloquent man, schooled in the practices of the day, and he knew the Scripture of the Old Testament well. He had been taught about Jesus and he was fervent enough in his faith in

Jesus, however slight that happened to be, that he was willing to speak of Jesus in the synagogues in Ephesus, just as Paul did. As you know Paul met significant opposition in Jewish synagogues throughout the Mediterranean world, including in Ephesus, one of the most violent reactions he received from Jewish people in synagogues in Ephesus. So for Apollos to stand and take this says a lot about him. But, according to verse 25, he taught about Jesus accurately, although he knew only the baptism of John. What's different? You go into the water, you get wet. That's what happens. It doesn't matter. John's baptism, Jesus' baptism, whatever, it doesn't make much difference, does it? The difference is that John's baptism had only to do with turning from sin. Jesus, on the other hand, commands a baptism that has to do with a commitment, not only to know about Christ, not only to be able to tell people about Him accurately, but a willingness to commit to a way of life. Does that sound like Psalm 119?

What's happening is that Apollos, despite knowing about Christ, is not yet following in the way of Christ. Priscilla and Aquila hear him preaching in the synagogue and they knew that he needed further teaching in order to fully understand the One in whom he had put his faith, and so it is that, according to verse 26, while he began to speak boldly in the synagogue, when Priscilla and Aquila heard him they invited him to their home to explain to him the way of God more adequately and accurately. That was pretty intolerant of them, wasn't it? I mean, he was talking about Jesus and what he was saying about Jesus was correct. He got the historical information accurate and he may have even known the theological stuff about it. So wasn't it awfully condescending of Priscilla and Aquila to say, "Well, he knows the way of John, but we're going to have to bring him up to speed." No, it wasn't. Because baptism is about a way of life. Jesus makes that quite clear in the Great Commission. Remember, He tells them to make disciples. He tells them to teach them all the commandments that God had given them. And he tells them to baptize, because baptism is not just a ceremony that happens to involve getting wet. Baptism is a sacrament that God works in to give us understanding, leading, grace by the Holy Spirit in order to enable us to not only know the commandments but to live them, to walk in the way.

Apollos had the stuff up here, and that was greatly needed. But Priscilla and Aquila knew there was something more that was needed. The interesting thing is that they took him aside and they taught him. They didn't criticize him in front of the crowd. They didn't even say, "You need to read some more in the Old Testament. You're missing something." They took it upon themselves to be the conduits through which God would teach him the way of His statutes, including the one regarding baptism. And I expect that that's because they knew the best way for us to grow in our understanding of Scripture and in the process our understanding of the way of life is in community, a community of learning. When we talk about knowing Christ's way, we're talking not about the solitary activities that we undertake on our own. Certainly that can happen and I wouldn't discourage anyone from doing that. But when Jesus went to call His disciples to Him, He didn't bring them together and say, "The Messiah has come and I am Him and here's a book and you need to find out all about Him." Instead, He lived with them for 3 years. He allowed them to hear His words, to see His actions, to come to understand at least in some small way what it means. They didn't just learn about the Messiah by looking at a

book, much less surfing a website. They did it together as a community to learn to understand and to grow.

So I'd like to ask you each this question: Are you part of such a community? Yes, you are part of a community that gathers on Sunday morning to worship and hear the Word of God proclaimed. That's great stuff. And Jesus did that as well. In the Sermon on the Mount there were a lot more than just twelve, there were probably thousands on the hillside hearing Him proclaim the Word of God. But He also makes it clear, as did Priscilla and Aquila with Apollos, as Paul did with Timothy and others, that we are to come together in other settings – one on one, two on one, twelve together – in a variety of community settings where together the Lord might use each of us to teach one another or to be taught by Him through one another. It amazing to think that in Sunday School class, in a small group, in a home, or in a conversation over a cup of coffee with a brother or sister, the Word of God can go forth and be heard and enable people to grow in the fullness of the stature of Christ.

Over the next few months you're going to be hearing more and more about small groups. That's one of the things the Session is working on. Some of you are already in one and that's marvelous. Keep it up. But those of you who aren't, I'd ask you to consider the possibilities that might come before you in the months ahead. Possibilities not just to learn but to have your heart transformed side-by-side with other brothers and sisters in Christ.