

Christ is Core
Col 1:16-23

Brothers and sisters, have you ever trained with a personal trainer? Maybe you signed up to have personal trainer take you through some orientation sessions when you joined the gym, and they showed you how to use the workout machines...

Or maybe you had been going to the gym for a couple years and working out but you weren't seeing the results that you wanted – so you decided to hire a trainer.

Or in my case I was complaining about a pinched nerve in my shoulder and neck and it just so happened that a personal trainer overheard me complaining about it and suggested that I come train with him, so I did... and that that's how I ended up discovering all benefits of a personal trainer.

And if you've ever worked with a personal trainer, you know a trainer helps keep you going to the gym even when you're tired and don't feel like going, because you've made an

appointment and someone is waiting there for you to show up!

And a trainer can teach you all sorts of things you didn't know, and correct a lot of things you thought you knew. For example, I learned about the importance of stretching and using a foam roller to roll out my muscles and how to target specific muscles that needed more work.

And I always knew it was necessary to stretch to avoid pulling or straining a muscle, but my trainer taught me that stretching is equally important to ensure that you have proper range of motion for your arms and legs and hips - in order to do your exercises with proper technique.

And that's where I needed a lot of correction. It turned out my pinched nerve was the result of lifting weights with bad technique! It took a lot of training but I learned how to lift properly and when my training sessions were done my nerve was no longer pinched and the pain was gone.

And as long as I continue to practice lifting with proper posture and do my stretches, I continue to benefit from that training from my personal trainer. When I neglect it and I'm sitting around a lot and not being very active, I will start to feel the effects of my inactivity and bad posture and I know I need to get back to training again... that makes sense doesn't it??

So, brothers and sisters, in the same way we must continue, as the Apostle Paul exhorts us in vs. 23 from our scripture passage this morning. *"We must continue in our faith, established and firm, and not move from the hope held out in the gospel."*

You see brothers and sisters, basic training in Christian living requires something from us, we need to respond, engage, work at it and continue on in it... and this is one of the most challenging and misunderstood aspects of becoming a Christian so its important that we talk about it for a moment.

So, if the hope that is held out in the gospel has been properly explained and communicated to you, you will understand and

believe as Eph 2:8-9 says *"it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— not by works, so that no one can boast."*

God does not offer us forgiveness in Jesus and save us unto everlasting life because we go to church, because we pray, because we read the bible or give tithes and offerings back to Him.

He doesn't save us because we're kind to others and nice to our neighbors or because we are diligent and hard-working people, or because we get good grades in school and we've stayed away from alcohol and drugs or all the crazy kinds of sexual weirdness going on these days.

God saves us because He chooses to do so, not because of anything that we've done or will do.

And this biblical truth sets us free from becoming enslaved by the impossible task of trying to live a life good enough to

prove to God that He should save us, or that we were worth saving.

However, though our sins are forgiven and we are being sanctified we have not yet been made perfect and our sinful nature still deceives us and resists the Holy Spirit's transformation in us.

Our sin will twist the truth that we are saved by grace into an excuse to avoid working at continuing in God's grace and cooperating with the Holy Spirit. Like when you are tired from being up early all week for work so you think *"I'll just sleep in and skip worship, besides we don't earn our salvation by good works like church attendance!"*

That's true isn't it – but it's also false right? That's our sinful nature twisting the truth so that it prevents us from responding to God's grace and as Col 1:23 says *"continuing in the faith."*

So, as the Holy Spirit gets us started in our basic training for our Christian living, it's important we understand that our efforts are not the basis for the grace by which we are saved, BUT they are the result, the fruit, the evidence that God's grace is at work in our hearts.

Now, this can lead to another problem for us because we start looking at our lives and wondering if we are "Christian enough." We wonder if there enough evidence, good works, and fruit to assure us that God's grace is truly at work in us?

Am I loving enough, patient enough, kind enough, gentle enough, do I have enough self-control – what about all my sinful and lustful desires that I struggle with, what about my pride, what about all the times I lose my temper? Is God's grace really at work in me? Am I really saved?

Brothers and sisters, if we are struggling with this, we need to be exhorted and reminded of the first and most important work which proves God's grace has brought us to faith. Jesus says in John 6:29 *"The work of God is this: to believe in the one*

he has sent.” And in 1 John 3:23 John echoes Jesus saying “And this is his command: to believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ.”

Do you need proof that God’s grace at work in your life? Look for the willingness to believe in Jesus Christ as God’s Son, the Messiah, your savior! 1 Cor 12:3 tells us *“no one can say, “Jesus is Lord,” except by the Holy Spirit.”* This is the first and greatest work brothers and sisters.

And the second one is like it, the confession of our sin. John 16:8 tells us the Holy Spirit *“will convict the world of its sin,”* and John echoes Jesus again, in 1 John 1:9 proclaiming that *“If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins..”*

So brothers and sisters... we are saved because of God’s choice and His grace alone through faith. As a result of that - we are called to works, to continue in that faith. So, what are the basic works we need to focus on?

It’s not being more loving, or kind, or helping the poor, or going to church more and so on... It’s believing in Jesus as God’s Son and confessing our sin to Him - and continuing in this. Being more loving, helping the poor, all the other stuff that we typically think of a good works flows out of these two works which we MUST continue in.

And the continuing work of confessing our sin means more than just asking daily for Christ’s forgiveness, must we also work to understand how deep and pervasive our sin goes... AND at becoming more sympathetic as to how our sin is so deeply offensive and putrid to God.

Let me give you an example of how this. When we read vs. 21 this morning - *“Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior.”* Did that really resonate with you? Do see your life prior to believing in Jesus as God’s Son and savior as a time when you were alienated from God, estranged from Him?

Do you understand the full depth of the enmity for God which made you see Him as your mortal enemy? Not just in your thoughts, but also as your mind is part of your emotions, feelings, desires and understandings.

I think we probably have a vague sense of God wanting us to do what's right, we would rather do what we want to do and there's sort of this tension between us and God, we probably wouldn't describe God as our enemy.

And while we wouldn't deny that we did some stuff that was wrong, like getting drunk, having a bad temper, being a selfish jerk, hurting people and so on... would we right away characterize what we had done as evil, wicked behaviors? That might be a bit much...

But if we have been continuing to work on confession, growing in our conviction of sin, how deep and pervasive it runs in us, and its offensiveness to God, then vs. 21 starts to hit a bit different. When we hear it we resonate with how God was our enemy and how our behaviors were indeed

wicked and evil – even though they may not appear very wicked or evil at all, humanly speaking. But its our perspective that is changing and we're seeing it from God's viewpoint and that changes everything.

In fact, what you'll come to understand, and I hope the Holy Spirit seals this into your heart and mind and soul right now, is that most evil and wicked behavior that we can exhibit as human beings is not the kind displayed on Oct 7 as Hamas terrorists raped, tortured, and murdered innocent Jewish people in their homes... as terrible and wicked as we see that.

In God's perspective – which is really the only perspective – the most evil and wicked thing we can do is to reject and disbelieve the one He has sent, and to refuse the conviction of our sin and to deny we are sinners.

You see brothers and sisters, all other evil and wicked behaviors flow out of this, not just the ones that are so obvious to us... but especially the self-righteous, moralistic, virtue signaling of our nice, polite, kind and tolerant fellow

Canadians- or ourselves. We begin to see this through God's eyes and realize it as the wicked and evil behavior that is so offensive to Him, our sin.

Now please understand, continuing in the faith in this way is not trying to work up a sense of false guilt in ourselves, nor is it self-hatred or self-deprecation... it is the result of actually coming to know God better, which is also more evidence of God's grace at work in our lives.

Vs. 22 in our scripture passage says "*He has reconciled you...*" God reached out and performed a restorative action on and for you, so that He is able to be in relationship with you again and show you who He is as God.

And the most explicit and intimate revelation of God Almighty comes to us in Jesus Christ.

Which is amazing! The means by which God reaches out and reconciles us, "*by Christ's physical body through death*" is also the means by which He most definitively shows us who He

truly is. A God who is willing to become one of us and die for us. Now that's a terrific starting point, AMEN! But... it's a *starting* point, not the finish line.

As you *continue* to know God more through Jesus, you will see God's holy character on display in the scriptures, His perfection in dealing with us and bringing about His plans, His beauty and wisdom in bringing forth the creation and His divine nature, majesty, glory and power!

And you will say with the Psalmist, "*What is man... who are human beings... who am I compared to this God?!*" Not just categorically or creationally but in His holiness, purity, and faithfulness, and righteousness.

And the more we are in awe of God in His perfection and majesty and goodness, the more we see the extent of sin infecting every aspect of who we are as humans, twisting even our best efforts in logic and reason, perverting our desires and emotions and feelings, misdirecting our actions, and poisoning our thoughts and words...

Not a pretty picture at all, not a pleasant revelation of self-awareness but a necessary one if we are to truly see Jesus Christ as our only hope and grow to love Him more and more.

Our Lord said to us in Luke 5:32 *“It is not the healthy who need a doctor but the sick, I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.”*

And in Luke 7:47 *“I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven—as her great love has shown. But whoever has been forgiven little loves little.”*

So, brothers and sisters, you can only love others more when you love Jesus more, and you can only truly forgive others when you grasp the gravity of what God has forgiven you in Jesus Christ. And this is impossible outside of the work we must do of continuing on in the faith.

This is why vs. 23 in our passage starts with an “If” brothers and sisters. All the benefits and blessings of knowing God in Jesus, all the forgiveness of our sin – and the transformation that the Holy Spirit will work to bring about to heal and bring

wholeness and restoration into our lives, and all usual things we know as good works... it’s all for us - **if** we continue on in the faith!

Now this is not a “gotcha **if**...” this is a “that’s just the way this works **if**.” This is not a penalty for stepping out of bounds, it just describes how it works so we realize that we need to make the effort to continue in the faith.

Because there are things that are going to move us out of the hope that is held out in the gospel, the deceitfulness of our sinful nature and the attractiveness or forcefulness of alternatives to Christ.

So, imagine that “*the hope held out in the gospel*” is a Sumo ring, and our training and goal as believers is to stay in that ring, and not allow anything that seems to be an attractive option to deal with sin to push us out or lure us out. Let me give you some examples...

As you become more aware of sin in your own life and in the lives of others, and you see the hurt, ignorance, sickness, brokenness and death that it brings about... you will find that the means by which we bring some relief to the consequences of sin, medicine, education, therapy, psychology, technological advancement, government, humanitarian efforts... these will present themselves to you as a solution to dealing with sin... as an alternative to Jesus.

They will try to lure you out of the ring with promises of all the good they can do,... or they will try to force you out of the ring through societal, educational or legal pressure as everyone else seems to believe that we can cure the human condition with a more education, a better gov't, a more equitable society, or better access to health care and so on...

But the root cause of the hurt, ignorance, sickness, brokenness and death in our society – in our world is sin – evil and wicked behavior - and it requires Christ as the solution, the savior! So, we must not move from that hope which is

held out to us in the gospel which is Christ, instead as Paul exhorts us in vs. 23 we must become *established* and *firm*.

To be established in this verse means lay a solid foundation, to really dig it in and settle something in place so it's not going to move or shift at all. To be firm in this verse is being steadfast, resolute, unwavering and immovable, and fixed on a purpose, like a dog with a bone.

And if we were going to talk about being firm and established by going back to the example of personal training and being able to stay in the ring, it would be about learning to engage your core muscles - so that you have a firm and established stance, which will keep you from being pushed out of the ring.

So, brothers and sisters, here's the big finish for our training session today – learn to engage your Christ core muscles! Strengthen your Christ core muscles so that you become established and firm and you will not be moved from the hope that is held out in the Gospel.

And the good news is that when you engage your Christ core muscles you strengthen them and when you strengthen them you are engaging them, and we've already learned about some of the spiritual exercises that engage and strengthen your Christ core; believing in Jesus Christ as God's Son and savior and confession of your sin to Him. Those are core Christ-core exercises that we should be doing every day.

But there are more exercises that you can do as well – keeping in mind that proper technique for these is a goal of focusing more on Christ, who He is, what He does, why we need Him and glorifying and honoring and obeying Him in all things.

So strengthen your Christ-core muscles by praising Christ. The beginning part of our scripture passage today is an excellent example of how to praise Christ and in fact it was probably a hymn that the early church would sing to praise Christ.

Let's read it together, and allow the magnificence and beauty and majesty these praises to inspire you and show you more of who Christ really is...

“The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together.

And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy. For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.”

Keep praising Christ like this, memorize this, sing songs like this, look for other Creeds and confessions from the church about Jesus, like the Apostle's Creed, the Nicene Creed, and you will find your Christ-core muscles stronger and more effective, making you firm and established.

The same goes for participating regularly in the Lord's Supper brothers and sisters. Our Lord gives us His body and blood to eat and drink so that we have a tangible means of expressing our belief in Jesus as God's Son and savior as well as confessing that we are sinners who need His forgiveness.

Eat and drink the Lord's Supper with intentional participation in this way and your Christ-core muscles will be strengthened and help keep you in the hope held out in the gospel.

And understanding, remembering, celebrating or receiving Baptism, the sign which assures us that we have been spiritually immersed into Jesus is another exercise that will strengthen our Christ-core – and we'll learn more about that as we have some baptisms coming up.

And lastly, brothers and sisters, reading the scriptures is an excellent way to strengthen your Christ-core and one of the most effective as well, but as with any heavy lifting its imperative that you pay attention to technique. So, make sure you are reading the scriptures to see how they point you

to Jesus Christ. As our Lord says in John 5:39 *"These are the very Scriptures that testify about me!"* If you need help figuring out how to do this, let me know I'll help spot you with that.

So brothers and sisters, Christ is core – train those Christ-core muscles, engage those Christ-core muscles, become established and firm, so nothing can ever move you away from the hope that is held out to us in the gospel – the one and only Mr. Universe himself – our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.