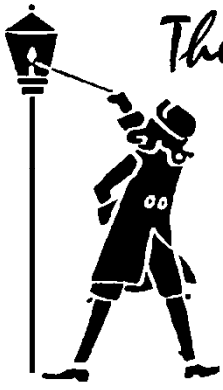

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IN CHRIST AND FOR CHRIST - TO KNOW CHRIST AND TO MAKE HIM KNOWN

October 20, 2008

GROWTH IS A CHOICE

“When you’re through learning, you’re through.” John Wooden

John Wooden coached the UCLA basketball team from 1948 to 1975. In his final twelve years, he built a dynasty that has been unequalled in the college basketball world. During that span, UCLA won ten national championships, including seven in a row. Four of those seasons were perfect, 30-0 in regular season and 14/15-0 in post-season. During those twelve years, the Bruins’ record was 563-33.

The man knew basketball. But those who knew Wooden say that he knew people better. He understood what it took to motivate young men to a high level of achievement. He had acquired a grasp of life principles that would lead to excellence in any area, and he was gifted at instilling those principles into his players.

John Wooden is a follower of Christ (now 98 years old). Two of his seven-point creed explain the source of much of his wisdom: “Drink deeply from good books, especially the Bible” and “Pray for guidance and give thanks for your blessings each day.” The quote above reflects the simple depth of that wisdom.

The grand scale of the universe and life demands that humans never abandon the classroom. You may graduate from institutions, but you never graduate from learning. Following Jesus magnifies that truth. Jesus stated, “And this is eternal life, that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent,” John 17:3. Learning to know the infinite God does not culminate with a ceremony and a degree. It will extend into eternity.

Some people like to argue, “You can’t teach an old dog new tricks.” First, we are not dogs. Second, we are not learning tricks. We are human creatures fashioned in the image of our eternal Creator, made for knowing Him and His creation. We were created for growth, growth in knowledge that accompanies perpetual changes in behavior.

For the past five years, Willow Creek has immersed itself in research. It began with their own church members, then expanded to six other churches, and then to 500 churches, amassing data from over 157,000 church attenders. The data demonstrates that people can actually be identified along their faith journey. As they move through the Find-Follow-Flavor stages of spiritual growth, they will embody certain characteristics congruous with their growth level. One stage that jumped out of the survey results was “Stalled,” marked by over twenty percent of those taking the survey.

The research indicates that lack of doctrinal knowledge does not produce this condition. These stalled Christians report a number of barriers hampering their growth, including life responsibilities (49%), unresolved emotional conflicts (45%), a failure to love people (30%), and addictions (24%). The greatest barrier to their growth, however, reported by 85% of the people in this group, was “not making spiritual growth a high priority.” They are stalled by choice. They are allowing the world to press them into its mould, accepting habits of living that fail to contribute to their spiritual growth.

The research continues to probe, asking respondents if they had ever experienced a stalled phase in their journey, and nearly everyone answered “yes.” When asked how they emerged from the rut, they gave a variety of answers. A personal crisis caused some to move ((32%). Some were just inspired by someone or something to make changes to their lives (29%), while a change in life circumstances motivated others (29%). Only 19% found their solution in changing churches. The most significant contribution to unclogging spiritual lives, however, was a renewed commitment to spiritual practices, such as daily Bible reading and meditation, prayer, journaling, etc. (61%).

We must constantly remind ourselves that the spiritual life consists in something much greater than just behavior. We are in a relationship with our Savior, the Son of God. And if our practices degenerate into mere activities, that relationship will wither. The practices are necessary, but they need to have a target beyond themselves.

If you are not practicing spiritual habits, it does not require a prophet to pronounce your spiritual life as “stalled,” or stale, or some other descriptor. It is possible that you are practicing spiritual disciplines and find yourself in the same condition. You are probably investing your energy on yourself and for yourself, rather than on Christ and your relationship with Him. The research continues to affirm what the Scriptures illustrate and teach: the spiritual life is about a relationship with our God and Savior.

So where are you in your spiritual journey? How is your relationship with Jesus? Growing or stalled? And what are you planning to do in the next six months to progress in your growth and relationship with Him? It is your choice.

Pastor Stan