

# Learning Christ

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West Side Church of Christ  
Searcy, Arkansas  
Nathan Guy

## Scripture Reading

“But that is not the way you learned Christ! For surely you have heard about him and were taught in him, as truth is in Jesus.” (Ephesians 4:20-21 NRSV)

## **INTRODUCTION**

I’m a sucker for baseball movies. *The Natural*, of course, is the best. *Pride of the Yankees* is a classic. I love baseball movies because when I was a kid, I learned baseball. I remember playing it on every kind of surface...from an asphalt parking lot to a grass-covered high school field. In dirt-filled old city park. In the street that ran right in front of our house. Sitting in my desk, when the teacher began to drone on and on about math, I stared out the window and played baseball in my mind. I try to make a yearly pilgrimage to Dodger Stadium in LA. (If you are a Cardinal or Braves fan, I’m sure God will let you into heaven too; or at least the farm system as you work your way up). But LA is where I first fell in love with baseball. I had always liked it. But then I sat in the stands of a palm-tree-lined upper deck. I tasted a Farmer John hot dog (with way too much relish) and switched on my transistor radio to hear Vin Scully call the plays. I witnessed the wave and the roar of the crowd. And I watched Kirk Gibson slide into home plate in the bottom of the 9<sup>th</sup> inning for a game winning run. And I was hooked. I think most of life’s greatest lessons can be found in baseball, don’t you?

In the 2012 movie *Trouble With The Curve*, a seasoned baseball scout is pitted against a young hot shot baseball executive. You know the kind. He’s got all the computer models; he’s learned how to read the analysis charts and print out the read-outs from the simulation models. He’s learned lots of interesting facts about the analysis of baseball. But the old, worn out, worn down scout, played by Clint Eastwood, can see the seams of the ball as it leaves the pitcher’s hand. He can hear the sound of the pitch hitting the catcher’s mitt and know if the pitcher has his stuff that day. He can read the slightest shift of bodyweight in a batter’s swing and know instantly if the swing will result in a pop up, a ground out, a line drive, a strike out, or a home run. He understands how a week away from home can affect a rookie pitcher’s energy level going into the 7<sup>th</sup> inning.

You see, he’s learned baseball. Real baseball. Not the kind that comes off the printer. I’m talking about the grass-stained, muddy cleat-wearing, sesame-seed spitting, bus-riding, superstition-keeping, Gatorade-smelling kind. He’s learned baseball. The kind that can only be learned by living with the game for decades so much that everything about the game becomes second nature. It becomes hard to tell where the game ends and you begin.<sup>1</sup>

### **LEARNING CHRIST**

It reminds me of one of my favorite lines in all of Scripture. Do you know the one I’m talking about? It’s right smack dab in the middle of Ephesians chapter 4. It comes right after Paul describes the path that leads away from God, the way of the crowd. Seeking self, you lose touch not only with God, but with reality. First you lose any sense of His Lordship; then you kill your conscience. Thinking you are now free, you become a slave to yourself. You feed every impulse, and you chase every obsession; and before you know it, you are addicted to the counterfeits that promise blessing and freedom but, instead, slowly ebb your life away.

And then Paul inserts this remarkably beautiful line—and it’s virtually the same in the King James, the New King James, The English Standard, the New Revised Standard, and the New American Standard: “But you didn’t *learn Christ* that way.” It doesn’t say “you didn’t learn *about* Christ,” as if he is the subject and we gain information about him. No, just as the thirsty hiker learns the refreshing nature of a drink of water, just as the Olympian learns victory the moment she crosses the finish line and looks up at her score, you, believers, *learn* Christ: a new way of seeing the world, a gush of refreshment and a new lifestyle of habits that re-orient your life. If you have an NIV, the verse is actually translated that way: instead of “you didn’t learn Christ that way,” it translates “but that is not the *way of life* you learned.” When you learn Christ, says Paul, nothing about that old way of life fits within the vision you now see before you, so it all has to go. Just as you are a new creation, behold everything becomes new, as God moves inside, reworking the gears, rewiring the senses, replenishing your soul, and renewing

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<sup>1</sup> In the movie, Amy Adams plays Mickey, Eastwood’s daughter. She is named after Mickey Mantle. An eager attorney, about to make partner, she had all but given up any hope of reconnecting with her father or the only life he ever knew. But as those movies always play out, she comes to help him for a weekend, and ends up giving up her career, and giving her life to baseball. She couldn’t help it. It didn’t hurt that she fell in love with a baseball announcer, who just happened to be Justin Timberlake. But it was also in her DNA. Day in, and day out, living and breathing baseball, she couldn’t run from it when it beckoned her back.

your mind, and your life becomes radically different as God, through His spirit, “reproduces his own character in you.”<sup>2</sup>

Learning *about* Christ is not the same thing as “learning Christ.”

It’s possible to learn the Bible and not learn Christ. Allow me to introduce you to Nick. When Nick was a boy, he attended church faithfully every Sunday. There at church, and even at home, Nick was taught to read the Bible. He had an uncanny ability to memorize, and his parents encouraged him to commit as much of the Bible as he could to memory. So one day (according to one version of the story), while still a boy, Nick stood before his church and quoted all 4 Gospels from memory. You’ve heard of Nick. The church was a Russian Orthodox Church. And the man’s full name was Nikita Khrushchev, Soviet dictator, atheist, and mass murderer.<sup>3</sup>

Knowing your Bible is not the same thing as knowing the Lord. In John chapter 5, Jesus says to the religious leaders of the day “*you search the Scriptures* because you think that in them you have eternal life” (Jn 5:39 ESV). For half of my adult life, I read that sentence as a commendation—“you read your Bible; that’s good. But you missed a verse, that’s the problem.” But what if this verse is not a commendation, but a condemnation. Read again with different emphasis in context. “You search the Scriptures because you think that in them have eternal life; The next Greek word “kai” can be translated “and” or “but.” “But they are simply witnesses to *me*. Yet you refuse to come to *me* that you may have life” (Jn 5:40-41). You’ve learned a book. (Remember, “learned” can describe what rules your life.) You’ve become people of the Book. But I want you to become people of the God of the book. You are committed to following written words; but I’ve come so that you might lift up your eyes and be people who follow a living, loving, Lord. Learning the Bible should lead you to Christ; but learning the Bible is not the same thing as learning Christ.

It’s possible to learn Christian doctrine and not learn Christ. When Jesus was confronted for healing and loving and serving and giving on the Sabbath, and was given book, chapter, and verse as to why he shouldn’t, you know, act like God to hurting people, he said “go home, and learn what this *means*: I desire mercy, not sacrifice” (Matt 9:13; cf. 12:7).

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<sup>2</sup> Language borrowed from *The Message* translation of Eph 4:17-24.

<sup>3</sup> See William Taubman, *Khrushchev: The Man and His Era* (Norton & Co., 2003); David R Smith, “Khrushchev’s Command of the Scriptures,” available at <http://www.itsthis.org/khrushchev%E2%80%99s-command-of-the-scriptures/>.

There is no doubt that it is our sin that separates us from God. And God is Just. He is Holy. We are sinful creatures. So it is fitting for us, like the Prodigal son, to fall before his feet and declare our unworthiness to be called sons and daughters of God. Armed with this true Christian teaching, Jonathan Edwards preached the most popular sermon of the 18<sup>th</sup> century—a sermon entitled “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God.” Here’s a quote from the sermon:

The God that holds you over the pit of hell, much as one holds a spider, or some loathsome insect over the fire, abhors you, and is dreadfully provoked: his wrath towards you burns like fire; he looks upon you as worthy of nothing else, but to be cast into the fire; he is of purer eyes than to bear to have you in his sight; you are ten thousand times more abominable in his eyes, than the most hateful venomous serpent is in ours.<sup>4</sup>

The sermon gets better. To be fair to Edwards, he follows this up by saying the reason you haven’t fallen into hell is because God’s hand is holding you up. But the description of God given by Edwards doesn’t look very much like the Christ I’ve come to know. I see God, I’ve come to know God, in Jesus Christ. “For God, who said, ‘Let there be light in the darkness,’ has made this light shine in our hearts so we could know the glory of God that is seen in the face of Jesus Christ” (2 Cor 4:6 NLT). “No one has ever seen God,” John tells us in his prologue, “but the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in the closest relationship with the Father, has made him known” (John 1:18 NIV). You say “show us the father”? “If you’ve seen me, you’ve seen the father” (John 14:9).

And did he ever show us the Father! He told the story of a Prodigal’s father who, when he saw his boy a long way off, runs to his son. And when his son begins his “unworthiness” speech, he stops him in mid-sentence. He told of a mission, given to him by his Father, to seek and to save the lost.

John 3:17 was in his Edward’s Bible, and it’s in yours. “God did not send His son into the world to condemn it; He sent his son into the world to save it.” Have you ever seen a child being abused by their parents, or bearing the scars of abuse? Didn’t you want to run to them, and hold them, and tell them, “What I see when I look at you is something beautiful, someone valuable, something precious in my sight?” My God looks upon you as worthy of nothing else...than to be adopted as sons and daughters, given the keys to the kingdom, and made heir of all things! He doesn’t kick a man when he’s down! He hears the anguished cry of his hurting people. “A bruised reed He will not break; and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out” (Isa 42:3). He knows our frame; he knows we

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<sup>4</sup> Jonathan Edwards, “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God,” a sermon preached at Enfield, July 8, 1741. See [https://www.blueletterbible.org/comm/edwards\\_jonathan/sermons/sinners.cfm](https://www.blueletterbible.org/comm/edwards_jonathan/sermons/sinners.cfm)

are dust (Psalm 103:14). “As a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear him” (Psalm 103:13). He runs to you. Can you imagine someone getting the impression “I’m one of those that God just doesn’t love”? The steadfast love of the Lord *never* ceases; his mercies *never* come to an end; they are new *every* morning.” (Lam 3:22-23). Those are some beautiful passages for the Old Testament Israelites, aren’t they? Wouldn’t you love to experience His new mercies every morning? We have that promise secured for us Gentiles because of Easter morning.

We learn the character of God by learning Christ. And it changes us, as we are made anew, created to be like God.

But not all Christians think like that. Not all Christians live like that. It shouldn’t be lost on us that Paul says this to Christians in Ephesus. To Christians. The early church father Jerome said,

If all who seem to hear Christ did indeed hear him, the apostle would never had said this to the Ephesians. They were those to whom he had already revealed the promises of Christ. Why would he then say conditionally: ‘if indeed you have heard him?’ To know Christ is the same thing already as knowing virtue. To hear of Christ rightly is the same as being attentive to all the virtues: wisdom, justice, temperance, fortitude and the other names by which Christ is called. Therefore if anyone has indeed heard and learned Christ, he would not be living ‘in the futility of his mind’ nor ‘be darkened in understanding’ nor be ‘alienated from the life of God.’ He would already have practical knowledge, since his ignorance would have been dispelled, his darkness illuminated and every blindness lifted from the eyes of his heart.”<sup>5</sup>

Martha knew a lot about Christ. She wanted the house to be fit for a king. But Mary, all Mary wanted to do was sit at his feet—the traditional position of a learner. And Jesus said, “Only 1 thing is needed, and Mary has chosen the better part.” His family knew a lot about him. They had seen him grow up. But in Mark 3, Jesus is in a house, and all of his followers are seated around him, the traditional position of a learner. But his family—his family is standing outside. “Jesus,” someone said to him, “your family is standing outside looking for you.” You find me if you are standing outside. Look around the room, said Jesus, these are my brothers, and sisters, and mother.

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<sup>5</sup> Jerome. See J. P. Migne, ed. *Patrologia cursus completes*, series Latina, Vol 26 (Paris: Migne, 1844-1864): 506A [622-23]. Cited in *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, New Testament Vol 8: Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians*, ed. Mark J. Edwards (Downers Grove: IVP, 1999), p. 163.

Judas knew a lot about Christ. But at the last supper (in Matthew’s gospel), Jesus said one of you is going to betray me. And one by one they said to Jesus, “Is it I, Lord?” Only 1 responded with a decidedly different variation. Judas answered back, “is it I, teacher?” The demons know a lot about Christ. They know of his power; they know of his authority. But they don’t know the tender sweetness from within, the kind that comes from sitting at his feet and walking hand in hand and trusting in his grace. The difference between the man who would betray him for 30 pieces of silver, the spirits who resist him, and those who fall at his feet and call him Lord and Savior, is the difference between knowing *about* Christ and, as Paul put it, “regard[ing] everything as loss because of the surpassing value of *knowing Christ* Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may *gain Christ* and be found in him” (Phil 3:7-9a). Paul says “I want to know Christ” even if it means sharing in his sufferings (Phil 3:10), experiencing him.

Do you see the difference between learning *about* Christ, and learning *Christ*? As Lynn Cohick puts it in her commentary on Ephesians, “Knowing *about* Christ keeps the Savior at a distance, but knowing Christ invites a radical reorganization of one’s view of reality and priorities.”<sup>6</sup> We have a word for that in English: conversion. Have you ever traveled outside the United States and bought a change of plugs thinking that would be enough? What happened? You fried your hair dryer. Because when you plug a 120V machine into a 240V outlet, what you needed isn’t simply to put on a new plug, but a converter that changes both sides of the connection, so that the outlet will read the machine as something different than it was before. Conversion is not simply a day when we were baptized; it means a change of identity. Klyne Snodgrass offers a powerful definition of conversion:

Conversion is the restructuring of a person’s thinking by the Holy Spirit as the result of a direct encounter with the love of God in the person of Christ ... In effect, we take off what we thought was life and put on Christ.<sup>7</sup>

I tell you that “Christ” is a new vision of reality; a new way of life; a paradigm-shifting encounter. Or, more to the point, an encounter that leads to a relationship that changes a man. Peter is so fearful of guilt by association, he is willing to deny Jesus 3 times on the very night he was betrayed. But in Acts chapter 4, the text reads “now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John, and perceived that they were uneducated, common men, they were astonished. And they recognized [NIV-“they took note”] that they had been with Jesus” (Acts 4:13 ESV). Paul was already bold, alright; bold enough to hold

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<sup>6</sup> Lynn H. Cohick, *Ephesians: A New Covenant Commentary*, NCCS (2010; Cambridge: The Lutterworth Press, 2013), p.248.

<sup>7</sup> Klyne Snodgrass, *Ephesians*, NIV Application Commentary, p. 240.

the coats at the stoning of Stephen. Bold enough to gather threatening letters and head on his way to arrest followers of the Messiah. Until his life-changing encounter with the resurrected Jesus himself. It's at least several days later that the scales fall from his eyes (both literally and figuratively), and he is immersed in the blood of the Lamb. It's a few years later that he returns from his time in the desert feasting with and learning Christ himself. And then...And then...wild horses couldn't get him off course as he endured beatings, and shipwrecks, prison, and abandonment. But these faithful witnesses couldn't help it. The Apostolic pair said, “we can't but speak what we have seen and heard.” Or as John would later write, “That which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands—the word of life...that which we have seen and heard we proclaim to you” (1 John 1:1-3 ESV).

They learned Christ. And they were never the same. He wasn't just a whole new man. It was a whole new world.

We should think of Christ as a way of life, just as the Bible describes truth as a person. In John 14, Jesus reminds his followers that he is going to prepare a place for them, to come back and receive them to himself forever. Thomas says “how can we know the way?” Jesus replies, “I am the way, the truth, and the life.” You see, for John, Truth is a person. Just as Christ is a way of life.<sup>8</sup> But we didn't have to leave our text to see this. In very next verse, Paul bears out the same point. You didn't learn Christ that way—“For surely you have heard about him, and were taught *in* him (KJV-“by him”), as truth is in Jesus” (Eph 4:21 NRSV). In the NIV translation, all three terms—way, truth, and life—appear in Ephesians 4:20-21.

Just two verses later, Paul tells us that God wants our spirits renewed (Eph 4:23), and that involves changing the way we see; once we change the way we see things, it will inevitably change *what* we see.

When Elisha's servant boy got up early one morning to wash his eyes, he looked up and saw only a wall of horses and chariots holding the enemies of Israel, surrounding the city, and cried out “Oh no, my lord, what shall we do?” “What shall we do?” answered back the prophet of Jehovah God's holy, special, chosen people. “Are you kidding me?”

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<sup>8</sup> It might be hard to wrap our minds around the idea that “Christ” is being used here in Ephesians 4 as a way of life. Let me try it another way. Let's ask John to help us out. Over in John 8, Jesus says “you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.” I've seen that quote used for every single thing under the sun. But do you want to know what Jesus meant by that in context? It helps when he offers a parallel verse to show us what he means. Just a few verses later, Jesus says, “if the Son sets you free, then you shall be free indeed.” So which is it? Is it the truth that sets you free, or is it the Son that sets you free? You are supposed to be making an uncomfortable connection as a set up for chapter 14.

The King of Aram sends out a crew, and that’s all you see? Who is the king of Aram and his minions? You can count ‘em if you want. But don’t you see? Lift up your eyes. Those who are with us are far more than those who are with them” (2 Kings 6:15-16). It’s hard to believe, but even God’s people sometimes need a little reminding of just who we are and who’s we are. So Elisha prayed, “Oh Lord, open his eyes, so that your servant may see” (2 Kings 6:17). And do you know what that servant boy saw when he looked around? He saw the hills full of horses and chariots of fire surrounding them all (2 Kings 6:17). Did God suddenly show up to help them in trouble? Not on your life. He was there before the enemy even approached. And only the prophet who had spent years in close association learning God had eyes to see it.

It’s the same story for us who have encountered the living Christ. When we learn Christ, we imbibe more than words on a printed page; more than rules and lists whereby we know we did all the right things and checked all the right boxes. We take on a living, breathing relationship with a living, loving Lord. The Jesus we affirm in our songs and prayers. The Jesus with dusty feet from the shores of Galilee that still lives and intercedes for us.

Before we got married, I learned a lot about Katie. But in years of intimate life—with nothing to hide—I’ve learned Katie. I can speak Katie. I know her looks. I can read her body language. And I know without a shadow of a doubt of her constant love for me. Don’t tell me that is simply a list of facts on a page. Or something I can explain to you if you’ll just listen to me talk long enough. No—you’d have to know her like I know her.

By walking in step with the Spirit, day in and day out, growing in our relationship with our first love, we learn Christ, and it changes us. And we are never the same.