

THE FIRST PRINCIPLES

SESSION 3

The final aspect of Jesus' command, to make disciples, is to teach them. Being a disciple is being a follower of Jesus' teaching. The early church called their summary of this teaching "The Didache," or "The Teaching." They believed that there was a core set of teaching of Jesus Christ, which had been delivered by the apostles, which everyone needed to learn. The core elements of this teaching are referred to in the New Testament as "the first principles of Christ." This entire series—thirteen study guides in all—is built upon the concept of "first principles." In this session we are going to study the basic passage where this concept comes from: Colossians 2:6-8. The principles of Christ are set against the principles of this world. If you are going to study these principles throughout 13 study guides, it is essential that you develop a personal conviction that they exist. Note: it would be helpful to review the design of *The First Principles Series* on pages 8-10 at this time.



Study the Scriptures

Read the Passage: Colossians 2:6-8

Think Through the Questions:

1. What do the images *rooted*, *built up*, and *established* communicate concerning progressing in our faith?
2. What are some of the elementary principles of the world?
3. What are some of the elementary principles of Christ, which you have learned so far?
4. What does it mean to be taken captive by a philosophy?

Summarize the Core Teaching of the Passage:

Write a paragraph, outline, annotate, or chart your conclusions—whatever best communicates for you. Be sure to comment on the images used for progressing in our faith. Also, try to define and contrast the principles of the world with the principles of Christ.

he wrote to the church at Ephesus. He was concerned that the churches understand fully what had happened to them. He wanted to see them fully understand their calling—their new life in Christ. He wanted them to understand God’s overall plan for their lives and fully grasp the importance of the church, that they might not only be stable in their understanding, but also live fruitful lives.

Paul’s concern in this passage was the whole sphere of how they lived their lives. The term he used for *walk* literally refers to how one lives his whole life, how he conducts life’s affairs. He wanted them to be rooted, built up, and established in their faith. Their “faith in Christ” was not just for their salvation, but it was to permeate every area of their lives. To get this idea across, Paul used the concept of philosophy. The world has a philosophy and Christ has a philosophy. The world’s philosophy is built upon the tradition of men—core ideas handed down from generation to generation. For example, we refer to the history of Western thought. Christ has an entire philosophy, which is founded on a different set of principles. Once we buy into a philosophy, it captures us. We then build our whole foundation on that philosophy—whether we are conscious of it or not.

The idea of a philosophy of the world and a philosophy of Christ is made more accessible by the concept of *elementary principles*, as it is translated in the New American Standard Bible. The world has a set of elementary principles, and Christ has a set of elementary principles. The phrase *elementary principles* is literally translated as “first principles” in the Greek. As in any discipline we must master the first principles before moving on to more complicated areas. Once we master the first principles, we have an ability to reason, to explore, to go on to more complicated matters. You might say that we develop “critical judgment” which is principle centered. In Hebrews 5:11-14 (which is the other place where the phrase *elementary principles* is used), the author states that maturity of judgment comes once a person has mastered the first principles. We develop discernment into life’s choices. We will be able to live by a set of principles, not a set of rules. This brings tremendous freedom.

Traditions is an interesting word in our passage. It literally means “that which is handed down” by teaching, usually inferring an authoritative or official teaching. It is used by Paul in 2 Thessalonians 2:15: “So then, brethren, stand firm and hold to the traditions which you were taught, whether by word *of mouth* or by letter from us.” It refers to the authoritative teaching handed down by the apostles to the churches.

In other letters in the New Testament, it is called “the teaching,” “the deposit of sound doctrine,” or “the faith.”

In the first 100 years after the death of the apostles, the early church referred to this teaching—these first principles—as *the didache* (Greek for “the teaching”). New Christians were expected to learn and master the *didache* shortly after they became believers.

Essentially, *The First Principles Series* is a modern, 21st century *didache*. The instructional quote below is a distillation of the first principles found in the apostles’ letters to the early churches. Those who master this entire series will in essence be mastering the first principles—the *didache*—in much the same form as it was delivered to the first churches.

Read and Reflect on Key Quotes:

“We usually think of the Christian message mainly as a set of beliefs, and miss the New Testament’s emphasis on the body of teaching about the Christian way of life. Jesus made it a central part of His ministry to instruct His disciples in the life God intended men and women to live (for example, the Sermon on the Mount and the Last Supper discourse). The apostles and the early church leaders made it a central part of their pastoral work to hand on and explain this instruction. Under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit the writers of the New Testament passed on this teaching to the church for all time. It forms the measuring rod for determining the soundness of Christians’ lives. As Paul wrote to the Romans, ‘Thanks be to God that you who were once slaves of sin have become obedient from the heart to the *standard of teaching* to which you were committed’ (6:17; see also 2 Tim. 1:13; 2:2).

“At the core of this daily-life teaching is the understanding that Christ came to make it possible for men and women to become sharers in God’s own nature (2 Peter 1:4), to become like Him (Matt. 5:48; 1 John 3:2). The early Christians saw the New Testament teaching about how to live as a continuation and perfection of the teaching given to God’s people in the Old Covenant. Jesus’ revelation made it possible to live more fully in accord with God’s intentions.

“In his book *Gospel and Law*, C. H. Dodd has noted that much of the New Testament follows a pattern: sections giving instruction in the truths of salvation are followed by sections in which the practical consequences are spelled out. The epistles, for example, often begin with

teaching about the work of Christ and conclude with directions about how to live as Christians; for instance, Romans, Galatians, Ephesians and 1 Peter. The *kerygma* ('proclamation' of the good news) and further instruction in the realities of the faith can be distinguished from passages presenting the *didache* (practical 'teaching' about living—pronounced did'a kay).

"Dodd identifies seven major propositions in the didache:

1. *The New Testament Christian is enjoined to reform his conduct.* For instance, Paul writes to the Ephesians: 'Put off your old nature, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful lusts, and be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and put on the new nature, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness' (4:22-24; see also Rom. 12:1-2; 13:11-14).
2. *The typical virtues of the new way of life are set forth.* 'But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control' (5:22-23; see also Col. 3:12).
3. *The proper Christian relationships within the family, the primary unit of the Christian community, are reviewed.* 'Wives, be subject to your husbands, as to the Lord.... Husbands, love your wives as Christ loved the church.... Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right' (Eph. 5:22,25; 6:1; see also Col. 3:18-21; 1 Peter 3:1-7).
4. *Right relationships within the Christian community are set forth.* 'Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast what is good; love one another with brotherly affection; outdo one another in showing honor' (Rom. 12:9-10; see also Col. 3:13-16; Phil. 2:1-4).
5. *A pattern of behavior toward pagan neighbors is described.* 'Conduct yourselves wisely toward outsiders, making the most of the time. Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer everyone' (Col. 4:5-6; see also 1 Peter 2:12,18).
6. *Correct relationships with constituted authorities are defined.* 'Be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to praise those who do right' (1 Peter 2:13-14; see also Rom. 13:1-7).
7. *There is a call to watchfulness and responsibility.* 'Be sober, be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion seeking someone to devour' (1 Peter 5:8; see also Eph. 6:10-18).

“Christ, the apostles, and the leaders of the early church considered the teaching about the Christian way of life to be the norm for Christians. They viewed the *didache* not as a distant ideal but as something that ordinary people would actually live out. Conversion meant new behavior: ‘By this it may be seen who are the children of the devil: whoever does not do what is right is not from God, nor he who does not love his brother’ (1 John 3:10). ‘By their fruits you shall know them’ (Matt. 7:20).

“The early church was not perfect. But the early Christians followed the Christian way of life sufficiently well that their distinctiveness—along with their bold announcement of the gospel—brought on them almost three centuries of persecution in the Roman empire, and at the same time helped to attract thousands of men and women to Christ, even though commitment to Him could end in martyrdom.

“In our own day it cannot be said that Christians in the West are following the teaching of Christ in a way that makes them particularly distinct. At a time when Western societies are swinging away from Christian values, Christians’ lives are generally failing to become more clearly distinguishable. Rather, as society becomes less Christian, so do Christians’ own patterns of life.”⁵

This quote is from “A Distinctive Way of Life,” by Kevin Perrotta, which is a chapter in *Leading Christians to Maturity*. The book is written by a collection of authors who are very committed to getting back to New Testament Christianity. It is now out of print, but this chapter is available in several BILD resources. See the Lifelong Learning section at the end of this booklet.

Record any insights from the brief commentary and quotes:



Think Through the Issues

In any instructional endeavor, the first principles must be mastered before studying matters that are more complicated. Imagine trying to do advanced algebra without knowing the basic principles of math. However, today we often go through school without mastering the first principles in hardly any of the subjects that we study. Therefore, it is easy to just enter our Christian life thinking that we will pick up a few things here and there. This is not the way that we should approach our new faith. It is important that we get it right. The foundations that we lay will shape the whole future of our lives. The questions below are designed to help you think more deeply about these first principles.

Issue: The importance of first principles

Think Through the Issue Before Discussion:

1. When in life have you had to learn a new set of first principles—a new course? A new job? A new sport?
2. If you don't learn the first principles of your faith, what problems might result?
3. What kind of commitment do you think it will take to master the first principles of Christianity? How long?

