

INTRODUCTION

When Coach Bob Stoops took over the Oklahoma Sooners football team two years ago, he found a group of talented athletes, but the team had a losing record. From examining game film, he came to the conclusion it was an undisciplined, out-of-shape football team. OU was one of the most penalized teams in the Big Twelve, and it was obvious they ran out of steam in the fourth quarter. His first task was to get them in shape. Before he ever created an offensive or defensive scheme, he instituted a rigorous conditioning program: They ran hundreds of miles and lifted tons of weights. They exercised endlessly. He taught them to be more disciplined in the basic rules of the game. He had a full-time officiating crew for every practice. Any player who incurred a penalty in practice was made to run wind sprints. For months, all Coach Stoops did was get the team in shape and teach them discipline. Then he taught them the basics of blocking, tackling and catching. He made his receivers catch tennis balls shot out of a gun at tremendous speed. He focused on the basics.

Has it paid off? As you know, Oklahoma just finished a perfect season and won the national championship. They weren't sensational. They seldom completed long passes or had long runs; they just played solid offense and defense and they committed few errors. They always seemed to have an extra reserve of energy for the fourth quarter. One interviewer asked Bob Stoops the key to the winning season and he replied that they outplayed every opponent in the fourth quarter. That was because they felt while other teams might have been more talented; they always felt they had the edge in conditioning. They excelled in the basics.

To me, the Christian life is the same way. The best growth happens when we focus on the basics. The Christian life doesn't have to be sensational; it involves consistently performing the basic disciplines. There is nothing sensational about a beautiful sunset but it has God's signature on it. If you want to really experience the joy of the Christian Life, you must continually practice these basic disciplines. You don't have to work *for* your salvation, but you certainly have to work at *growing* as a Christian. It doesn't happen automatically.

Perhaps you heard Paul Harvey talk about a retired couple who purchased a large motor home several years ago. Back then one of the great features was cruise control. As they were traveling up the West Coast, the husband became tired and asked his wife to drive while he went in the back to take a nap. As she was driving she put the camper on cruise control and it worked perfectly. After a few minutes of straight highway driving she got up to get a drink. Of course, the motor home ran off the road and crashed into a ditch. Fortunately, neither of the passengers was injured. After the accident, the wife told the highway patrol she thought cruise control would keep the RV on the road! She never made that mistake again. Sadly, many Christians have put their spiritual lives on cruise control; they aren't really actively paying attention to worship, Bible study, and prayer. No wonder so many of them wind up in the ditch spiritually.

This month, I've been challenging all of us to get back to the BASICS of the Christian life. Each of the six letters in the word BASICS represents one of these core values of the Christian life. "B" reminds us of the importance of Bible study. "A" lets us know how important Adoration, or corporate worship is. "S" is to let us know that Soul-winning, or sharing our faith, is absolutely essential. "I" is for Intercession, because Prayer is a necessary discipline. Today, we are going to

look at the final two basics. The “C” is for Compassion and the final “S” is for Stewardship. I’d like for you to have one of the “Back To The BASICS” bookmarks handy because at the conclusion of this message, I want to lead you in a time of personal commitment for 2001.

Our central text to see what a healthy church is like is found in Acts 2:42-47:

“They devoted themselves to the apostles teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayers. Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. Everyday they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.”

First, let’s notice the importance of

I. COMPASSION–LOVE THAT CARES ENOUGH TO ACT

We read in verse 42 these early believers enjoyed fellowship, or *koinonea*, which means to “share together.” It also says they “were together and had everything in common” and they “gave to anyone as he had need.” What a beautiful picture of a group of people who demonstrated compassion toward each other. Real love doesn’t just say, “I love you”—it acts. Love is a verb not just a noun. For a Christian, there are two sides of compassion.

1. Helping hurting people within the church

Our English word for “compassion” literally means “to feel with.” Compassion means you feel the pain and needs of those who are part of the body of Christ with you. It’s what the Bible means when it says we are to “bear one another’s burdens.” (Galatians 6:2). The church is the Body of Christ, and we are like the parts of our physical body. When one part of your body hurts, all the other parts notice it too and the other parts go to help ease the pain. If I hit my thumb with a hammer, it affects my entire body. My arm will jerk my hand away probably stick the injured thumb into my mouth. And I don’t know why, but my feet will probably get into the act, too, as I hop around.

It’s the same way with the Body of Christ. When one part is hurting, it affects all of us. Paul writes in Romans 12:10, “Be devoted to one another in brotherly love. Honor one another above yourselves.” Compassion not only means you feel the pain of others; it means you will anticipate their pain and try to prevent them from being hurt. If my eyes see that my thumb is the target of the hammer, it will send a message to my arm to remove the thumb before the pain happens. Compassion means whenever you see one of the members of the church in pain, it causes you pain and you want to do something to help them. It also means you want to help them avoid pain.

In Acts 16, Paul and Silas were arrested. Before they were thrown into prison, a Roman soldier beat them. That night, God sent an earthquake and the chains on their hands and feet were

loosed. As they escaped from the prison, they encountered the Roman soldier. He was preparing to fall on his own sword and kill himself. It was a capital offense for a soldier to lose prisoners, so he was going to execute himself. Paul stopped him and reported that all the prisoners were still present. The soldier was so amazed he asked Paul, "What must I do to be saved?" Paul replied, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ." The Roman soldier accepted Christ on the spot. Then, do you know what the soldier did before he was baptized? He washed Paul and Silas' wounds. There was a good chance he was the very one who administered the whip—now he was washing their stripes. To me, that is a beautiful picture of how Christian acts. Every time we gather for worship or for small group Bible Study, there are hurting people all around you. Sometimes we need to just wash their wounds.

Very often I have heard that someone in a Sunday School class will share a burden or need they have in their life. Sometimes this burden is so painful the person begins to weep. On many occasions, other class members gather around this person and place their hands on their shoulder or arm and begin to pray for that person. That's what it means to wash one another's wounds. That's compassion.

If we aren't continually demonstrating compassion to one another, we really can't call ourselves a church.

Compassion is:

2. Showing kindness to those outside the church

True compassion doesn't just end within the church. We also read in verse 47 that these Christians "enjoyed the favor of all the people." That means people who weren't Christians still looked with favor upon those within the church.

A week ago Saturday, I was traveling with some other people from our congregation from Jerusalem toward Jericho in the Jordan Valley. In the space of about forty miles you go from 2,500 hundred feet above sea level to over 1,300 feet below sea level (the lowest spot on earth). So when Jesus told the story of the man who "went down" from Jerusalem to Jericho, He wasn't kidding—it's downhill all the way. Jesus talked about the man who was mugged and robbed on that same road. He was left half-dead, naked and bleeding. Two religious people passed by, a priest and a Levite and they moved to the other side of the trail to avoid the injured man. Then a Samaritan, whom the Jews considered to be dirty half-breeds, came by and had compassion for the stranger. He washed his wounds and placed the man on his donkey. He delivered him to an innkeeper and offered to pay all the hospital bills for this total stranger. Jesus said, "Go and do likewise." Even our new President spoke at his inauguration about the need for each of us to help the man on the road to Jericho. I agree.

I have just finished a book by Steve Sjogren called *Conspiracy of Kindness*. He writes that the best, most non-threatening form of evangelism consists of performing acts of kindness to the community. He started a church in Cincinnati a few years ago that has over 3,000 members. Their main form of outreach is going out into the community and performing acts of kindness,

with no strings attached. They aren’t doing it as “P.R.” for their church or to impress anyone. They simply want to demonstrate the love of God to their community.

This is something we ought to be doing all the time but this September we are going to have a LYN week. LYN stands for Love Your Neighbor. Like this church in Cincinnati, we are going to send teams out in the community to perform acts of kindness. Some of these acts of kindness include washing people’s windshields in parking lots, giving out free soft drinks, handing out Gatorade or cold water near jogging trails. They going into businesses and restaurants and offer to clean the restrooms—and all of this is absolutely free. The teams will set up in several malls during the holiday season and wrap presents—free. When it’s raining, they’ll go to grocery store parking lots with golf umbrellas and escort people to and from their cars. They’ll set up tables on Saturday mornings in front of home improvement stores and offer free cups of coffee. They’ll cut grass and rake leaves for people who can’t—and they’ll never accept any payment. These are just a few of the hundreds of kindness activities possible. They’ll simply pass out cards reading something like, “This is our way of saying God loves you—no strings attached. Let us know if we can tell you more.” We’ll have directions to the church on the back of the card.

The beautiful thing about this activity is that you don’t have to know the four laws or the six keys or any pre-packaged, canned presentation. You simply show God’s love by performing acts of kindness in the community. Do you know when our church will really have an impact on this community? When we build a big building? No. When we are seen on television? No. When we give a lot of money to missions? No. We are already doing these things and we haven’t truly impacted our community. It will happen when people around us see the love of God demonstrated in our lives. That’s why Jesus said, “By this (love) all people will know you are my disciples.”

Why should we show kindness to strangers? Because God has demonstrated kindness to us. Paul wrote, “We once lived in malice and envy, being hated and hating one another. But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy.” (Titus 3:3-4) We don’t demonstrate kindness to strangers because they deserve it, any more than we deserve God’s kindness. We perform acts of kindness because we have received God’s kindness and mercy.

The final letter in the word BASICS is to emphasize the importance of personal:

I. STEWARDSHIP—HONORING GOD WITH YOUR MONEY

Acts 2:45 tells us the disciples sold their possessions to meet the needs of the early church. This was not just a one-time experience. Later, they are seen doing the same thing in Acts 4:32, 34 “All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of his possession was his own, but they shared everything they had...There were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned lands or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales and put it at the apostles feet.”

A healthy church is always a generous church. These early disciples were so excited about what God was doing, they were willing to sell their houses and land and bring the money to the

apostles. Lest you get the impression this was a perfect church, however, you ought to read Chapter 5 sometime. A couple, Ananias and Sapphira, also sold some property but rather than bringing the full amount, they only brought a portion of the money. There's nothing wrong with that, but then they lied about it. They said it was the full amount they received for the property—and that was their fatal mistake. If they had simply admitted they were only giving half or a third of what they made on the sale of the property everything would have been fine. But they lied to God. God takes our giving to Him very seriously. It would have been dangerous to allow the cancerous behavior of deceit to spread through the young, small body of Christ, so the Great Physician had to perform a radical-member-ectomy on the church—those two members died on the spot!

A.W. Tozer wrote:

There is a disease, which is particularly virulent in this part of the twentieth century. It is called cirrhosis of the giver. It was actually discovered about 34 A.D. and ran a terminal course in a couple named Ananias and Sapphira. It is an acute condition, which renders the patient's hand immobile, when it attempts to move from the billfold to the offering plate. The remedy is to remove the afflicted from the house of God, since it is clinically observable that this condition disappears in alternate environments such as golf courses, or clubs, or restaurants.

One of the most important disciplines of the Christian Life is the discipline of stewardship. Some of you in the investment business work very hard to understand our local and national economy so you can make wise investments for yourselves and your clients. Nowadays, you also have to understand what we call the global economy. Sharpen your pencils, because God has His very own economy, and understanding God's economy is absolutely essential if you want to be a good steward.

FOUNDATIONAL PRINCIPLES OF GOD'S ECONOMY:

1. God owns all the wealth in the universe

The Bible says, "The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof." (Psalm 24:1) Some people picture God as some nice old gentleman, kind but poor, sitting in a rocking chair. They think they are doing Him a big favor by giving some of their money to Him. Think again, God owns all the gold, diamonds, platinum, oil, gas, and real estate on this planet. What is God's net worth? We don't have a number large enough to describe it. Our culture is impressed with money. This afternoon many Americans will watch the Super Bowl. Advertisers will pay \$2.3 million for a 30-second spot. To put it in perspective, our entire church budget for 2001 is a little over \$7 million—that's less than 90 seconds of commercials this afternoon! Our new church facility is going to cost \$26 million—that's roughly 5 minutes of Super Bowl commercials. The world thinks in terms of millions and sometimes Christians almost want to apologize for the amount spent on ministry, buildings and missions. Our God owns and controls *all* the wealth in the universe and sometimes we think of ourselves as His poor step children. Our Father is immeasurably wealthy!

Last week as we were flying into Newark to make our connection for Tel Aviv, I was sitting next to a big guy. He didn't say much when I first greeted him. Instead of the meal, all he had was three of those little bottles of vodka so after awhile he got pretty talkative! For the rest of the flight we talked about God, Jesus, and Baptists. We really had a wonderful, friendly conversation. When we landed I asked him, "Do you like Continental Airlines?" He said, "Sure." I said, "Thanks, because my Father owns this airline. He also owns American and Delta, too." He smiled and said, "Oh, I get it, I bet you're talking about your Father in Heaven, huh?" I said, "Sure enough!" After an hour of talking this guy had already figured out what I'm try to teach you today. God owns it all!

2. God allows us to manage a portion of His wealth

We don't really own anything. If you think you own that house or that property, I'd like to see you come back and claim in a thousand years! To each of us, God has entrusted a different amount of His wealth. Some of us have a little, others have more but we must remember, it's not ours—it all belongs to Him. We only manage it for a short time. The word "steward" is a word that means "manager." "Stewardship" is a word that addresses how we "manage" the resources God has given us. Jesus says if we are faithful with a little, we can be faithful with much. One day every Christian will stand before the Judgement Seat of Christ (this is *not* the Great White Throne Judgement of Revelation 20). One of the things Jesus will consider is how well we managed the resources He gave us.

3. God wants His wealth in circulation to support His work

The last thing God wants us to do with His wealth is to store it up and hoard it for ourselves. The attitude of many people is: Get all you can; can all you get; sit on the can; and poison the rest! Later this year, as we study verse by verse through Luke, we are going to come to an important story Jesus tells in chapter 19. A master goes away and gives each of his servants a certain amount of money. One servant earns ten times his original amount, and the master praises him. A second servant earns five times his original amount, and the master rewards him. However, one servant took his money and placed it in a cloth—in other words, he stored it. The master was very angry and took it away from him when he returned. He criticized the servant and said, "At least you should have put it on deposit to earn a little interest!" You don't have to be rocket scientist to apply that story. The master is Jesus and He has entrusted a certain amount of resources to each one of us, the worst thing we can do is to hoard it. The best thing we can do is to keep it in circulation to support His work.

I've known some people who were super-conservative and said they were "saving for a rainy day." Jack Taylor once said, "If you are saving for a rainy day, you'd better be careful because God may just see that you have one." You see, we aren't to trust our savings accounts, our retirement plans, or our 401K plans. We shouldn't put our trust in our portfolios or our real estate holdings; we are to put our trust in God and God alone.

4. God gives a greater blessing when we give for His work

The way we keep God’s resources in circulation is to give for the support of His work. Listen to what God is saying to each one of us: “Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. Test me in this,” says the Lord Almighty, “and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that you will not have room enough for it.” Malachi 3:10. The word “tithe” means 10%. The tithe has always been the starting point for stewardship. Before the Ten Commandments existed, Abraham brought a tithe to Melchizedek, who was a type for the Lord Jesus. For the Jews, a tithe was the Law—for us, we aren’t under the law, we are under grace. But Jesus said our righteousness should exceed the righteousness of the scribes and the Pharisees. The tithe is only the starting point for Christian stewardship; anything above and beyond the tithe is grace giving.

I’ll never forget hearing about a sharp young couple that joined FBC, Orlando, where my friend Jim Henry is pastor. This couple had no church background, and they came to know Christ and were baptized. They were so excited about doing everything the Bible teaches. One Sunday, Jim Henry just happened to read Malachi 3:10 about tithing. He didn’t explain what tithing was, only that it is something that every Christian ought to do. After the service the young husband came up to him and said, “Pastor, we have decided that we are going to tithe—now what is it? What does a tithe mean?” Jim explained that it meant giving 10% of their income to the church. He said, “Great! We’ll start this week.”

The reason I like that story is because here is a couple that decided to obey God before they even knew what it was! That’s real faithfulness. God invites us to test Him in this area. As far as I know this is the only place where God invites us to test Him. Everywhere else, He tests us. It’s as if God is saying, “Go ahead, if you don’t believe me, try it for awhile and see what happens. If I don’t open the windows of heaven and pour out a blessing on you—call me liar.” Every January, I enjoy issuing this challenge to people who aren’t tithing. Go ahead, try it for a minimum of six months; give God 10% of your income and see what happens. If your life is not more blessed than before you started tithing, then God is a liar and you can’t trust Him. This is very important folks, because if you can’t believe God about Malachi 3:10, you can’t believe Him in John 3:16. But, praise God, thousands of us who have been tithing for years can testify, not that tithing works—but that God can be trusted.

J. L. Kraft, head of the Kraft Cheese Corporation, who had given approximately 25 percent of his enormous income to Christian causes for many years, said, “The only investment I ever made which have paid constantly increasing dividends, is the money I have given to the Lord. Pastors will do their greatest service in leading their men to understand the truth of God concerning the stewardship of time and money.” John D. Rockefeller explained a great principle when he said: “I never would have been able to tithe the first million dollars I ever made if I had not tithed my first salary, which was \$1.50 a week.”

5. God approves our stewardship when we give to Him first

Too many folks consider tithing and say, “I just can’t do it! After I pay all my bills, there is nothing left over.” That’s the problem right there—God deserves more than your leftovers. You must put God first. When you sit down to write your bills each month, or whenever you do it, write your check to God first and then pay your house payment or rent, utilities and insurance

etc. More folks are going to electronic transfers for all their business transactions, others are paying all their bills online and don't even write checks anymore. If you want to pay your tithe electronically, just contact our business office and we'll help you set it up. However you pay your bills, put God first. Most of us are familiar with the first part of Proverbs 3 where we are told to "trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not unto your own understandings, in all your ways acknowledge Him and He will direct your paths." That's great advice, but look at the verses that follow. They tell us a practical way we can prove we trust in the Lord: Proverbs 3:9-10 "Honor the Lord with your wealth, with the first all your crops; then your barns will be filled to overflowing, and your vats will brim over with new wine." Since most of us trade in currency rather than agriculture, "first-fruits" means "first check" or "first transfer" for us. The reward is the same when you put God first. Remember, on December 31 I preached from Luke 6:38 where Jesus said, "Give and it will be given unto you, a good measure pressed down and shaken together and running over shall be poured into your lap. For with the same measure that you give it will be given unto you." In other words, if you give with a thimble, your return is a thimble full. If you give a shovel full, God shovels back to you—and His shovel is always bigger.

A Christian lady once told me she had a disturbing dream. She dreamed she arrived at her mansion in heaven and it was only made with the materials she had sent on ahead of her in giving to the Lord's work. She told me she was afraid her house on earth was much nicer than her mansion in heaven. That dream turned her into a generous supporter of God's work.

Jesus said, "lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven...for where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." Is your heart in heaven right now, or is it in dirt, paper, or a cold, dark bank vault. How much of the blessings that God has given you have you transferred to heaven?

CONCLUSION

Cindy and I made a commitment to tithe when we were married in 1974. In 1975, I resigned as Minister of Youth at FBC Prattville, Alabama and we moved to Louisville, Kentucky to attend seminary. After renting a U-Haul truck and making a deposit on our little apartment, we were almost completely out of money. We were going to attend church on our first Sunday, and even though we weren't members of the church, I knew I hadn't yet tithed on my last check. I looked at our checkbook. If I wrote the tithe check, there would not be enough money left over to buy groceries or to pay our first month's rent (\$75). I had to make a choice, give our tithe or hold back to pay these other bills. I can remember thinking, "Okay, Lord, you said you would take care of us, I believe you." I wrote the tithe check. We were broke but we were happy. That afternoon, we were unpacking some boxes. The folks at the church at Prattville had given us a little going away party and we were getting ready to throw away some of the cards we had gotten. I re-opened a card from a particular family and a check I hadn't seen before fell out. I opened it up and it was for \$100. A note from Mr. Herrod who ran the Chevron Station in Prattville read, "I thought you might need a little help getting started at seminary." I hollered for Cindy—and we literally cried as we saw the hand of God so clearly revealed. Since that day to this, I can testify God has met our needs and given much more in return. I can say like David wrote in Psalm 37, "Once I was young and now I am old, and I have never seen the righteous forsaken nor His seed begging bread." Sometimes, you never have the joy of knowing God is all you need, until you are at a place where God is all you have.

If you want to enjoy the maximum abundant life, these six BASICS must be a part of your life. There are 66 books in the Bible: 1,189 chapters; 41,176 verses; 774,746 words (KJV). Instead of being overwhelmed by all these chapters and verses, why don't you just concentrate this year on developing excellence in these six areas? If you will, I promise this will be the year of the greatest growth in your personal walk with God. Can you imagine what will happen in our church if we focused on these six core values? Once again, ask yourself: *What kind of church would this church be if every member was just like me?*

OUTLINE

COMPASSION—LOVE THAT CARES ENOUGH TO ACT

Compassion is:

1. Helping hurting people within the church

Be devoted to one another in brotherly love. Honor one another above yourselves. Romans 12:10

2. Showing kindness to those outside the church

"We once lived in malice and envy, being hated and hating one another. But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy." *Titus 3:3-4*

STEWARDSHIP—HONORING GOD WITH YOUR MONEY

"All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of his possession was his own, but they shared everything they had ... There were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned lands or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales and put it at the apostles feet." *Acts 4:32, 34*

Foundational principles of God's economy:

1. God owns all the wealth in the universe

2. God allows us to manage a portion of His wealth

3. God wants his wealth in circulation to support His work

4. God gives a greater blessing when we give for His work

"Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. Test me in this," says the LORD Almighty, "and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that you will not have room enough for it." *Malachi 3:10*

5. God approves our stewardship when we give to Him first

Honor the LORD with your wealth, with the **firstfruits** of all your crops; then your barns will be filled to overflowing, and your vats will brim over with new wine. *Proverbs 3:9-10*



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To put it in Texas terms, “You’re mighty welcome to use any and all of my ingredients; just make your own chili!”

For the Joy...
Pastor David Dykes