Sunday, April 22, 1990
TEN SUGGESTIONS FOR GROWING CHRISTIANS
Luke 2:52; Romans 12:2; Matthew 7:13-14

“And Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature, and in favor with God and other human beings.” — Luke 2:52

“Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may prove what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.” — Romans 12:2

“Enter by the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few.” — Matthew 7:13-14

Today, in the 11:00 a.m. service of worship, 23 young people will be joining this congregation. Twenty of them will be confirming the baptismal vows taken by their parents on their behalf when they were very young children or infants. Three of the young people will be baptized this morning before joining the church.

Here are ten suggestions for these young people as they continue to grow as Christians. But these suggestions are not only for them; they are for all of us, because in our kind of church, we believe that all of us, no matter our age, are to continue to grow and mature in our faith.

1. Continue to Grow and Mature in Faith
The first suggestion is that confirmation is not graduation. Continue to grow and mature in the faith until the day you die. We never reach the point where we can say, “Now I have it all.” The Gospel of Luke reports that Jesus increased in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and others. That is our goal too. Keep growing and maturing in the faith.

2. Let Jesus’ Example and Teachings Be Your Guide
As you continue to grow, let the example and teachings of Jesus be your guide throughout your life. The early Christians were not called Christians, but rather “followers of the way"—the way of Jesus. The Christian life is a process, a journey, a pilgrimage. We are always to be following in the steps of Jesus.

3. Act Toward People, Don’t Just React
As you follow Jesus, you will discover that Jesus acted toward people, whereas we tend to react. Here’s an example that has helped me and many other growing Christians. A man told this story, and I’ve never forgotten it. “I walked with my friend, a follower of Jesus, to the newsstand the other night, and he bought a paper, thanking the newsman politely. The newsman didn’t even acknowledge it. ‘A sullen fellow, isn’t he?’ I commented. ‘Oh, he’s that way every night,’ shrugged my friend. ‘Then why do you continue being so polite to him?’ I asked. ‘Why not?’ inquired my friend. ‘Why should I let him decide how I’m going to act?'”

The key word here is “act.” This follower of Jesus “acts” toward people; most of us react. His actions are not solely dependent on what happens to him but come from an inner spirit and motive.

4. Live Your Life by More Than Just Feelings

As a follower of Jesus, live your life by more than how you happen to “feel” at the moment. Another story: Harry Emerson Fosdick tells about the best advice ever given to him, and it came from his father. One day, when Harry was about 15, he heard his father say to his mother as he was leaving the house for work one morning, “Tell Harry to cut the lawn today after school if he feels like it.” His dad took several more steps and then turned around and said to his mother, “Tell Harry he’d better feel like it.”

Fosdick said he never forgot that suggestion: “Tell Harry he’d better feel like it.” Sometimes there are things that need to be done, and we don’t feel like it, but then his dad’s phrase would come back to him: “Tell Harry he’d better feel like it.”

5. Act Yourself into a New Way of Thinking
Jesus taught that you can act yourself into a new way of thinking. He called upon men and women to follow him and to act the way he acted toward people, and in doing so, their lives were changed.

Over and over again, Jesus called upon people to change their behavior, their actions, because he knew that once they began acting in a new way, their thinking would also change. It goes along with what I said in the fourth suggestion — there are times when, if you don’t feel like doing something that needs to be done, if you go ahead and begin doing it anyway, you will find yourself feeling like it.

6. Let Your Life Be of Service to Others
Let your life be one of service to others. Again, Jesus said you will only find your life by losing it, by giving it away. Those who are giving people are the truly happy people. This goes against much of what present-day culture teaches us. Over and over again, there are strong voices in the culture that tell us we will find meaning and happiness in life by making more money so that we can buy and consume more for ourselves.

This world is filled with stingy, hoarding people, many of whom seem to really believe that what they have belongs to them and not to God and that they can take it with them when they die. I hope you will become giving, generous individuals rather than stingy, unhappy people.

7. Distinguish Between Needs and Desires
Work at distinguishing between needs and desires in your life. We often get them confused. There are many things we desire, but that does not mean we need them. For example, I might desire a new stereo color television, but that does not mean I need one. I might desire a new BMW, but all I need for my work is dependable transportation. In fact, there are many things that I desire but that would not be good for me if I had them.

There are powerful forces in our culture that are continually working to increase our desires and then to convince us that we actually need what we desire and that if we have those things, then and only then will we be happy. Furthermore, these forces try to convince us that we deserve all the things we desire. Always make a careful distinction between need and desire.

8. Remember the Difference Between Beliefs and Faith
As you continue to grow as a Christian, remember that there is a difference between beliefs and faith. We sometimes get these as confused as needs and desires.

Belief is not faith. The inquisitions, all the holy wars, and much of the modern-day internal warfare within and between denominations are never about faith. They're always about beliefs. People say, if you don't believe the way I believe, then you're outside of God's kingdom.

Faith in God, on the other hand, is a stance one takes toward all of life. We may disagree on our beliefs about God, but we can at the same time have faith in God. Belief is passive; faith is active. Faith implies doubt. The Apostle Paul had doubts at the end of his life: "What if I, after having preached the way to others, have missed the way myself?" Do not be afraid when doubt comes your way. And remember to distinguish between faith and belief.

9. Be Regular in Your Participation in Worship
If you are to continue to follow in the steps of Jesus and grow and mature in your faith, the most important thing to do now and throughout your life is to be regular in your participation in worship.

Regularly taking part in worship will help keep your life and your values in perspective. It will be a continual reminder to you that there is a spiritual dimension in your life that is not to be neglected but needs to be continually cultivated. Some of you will drop away for a while, but I hope you will return. There will be many Sunday mornings when you won't feel like coming to the worship service, but then remember, as I said in one of the previous suggestions, there are some things we'd better feel like doing.

10. Remember This Life Is Only a Beginning
This life is only a beginning. Our Christian faith reminds us that we human beings have an eternal destiny. I know that young people do not think very much about eternity, but Jesus revealed the human future as leading through the forbidding doorway of death to limitless life. And this door is open to any and all people. From God's point of view, all human beings have equal value.

As you grow as a Christian and follow all of these suggestions, remember this: treat God's creation with love and care, and of course, this includes human beings. After all, our Christian faith teaches that the way we treat people is the way we treat God. Amen.