

Christianity 101

Just what would be found in a course called Christianity 101? The terminology comes from the way courses are traditionally named in curriculum for various departments outlining what subjects are taught and their content. If looking at a course catalog the number 101 would indicate that it would be the very first course on that subject, an introductory course giving the basic outlines of the subject. The first one in the listing indicates an entry level course; a course to establish the fundamentals needed to understand the subject. While the 01 indicates there are no other more basic courses on that subject in that department so the requirements for taking that course would be minimal—probably none at all. Within the two passages read this morning, some would say you could discover what would be in such a course, some things that would be basic to the subject—even if one of the passages comes from the Hebrew Scriptures written by a prophet long before Jesus' time. In college many subjects or the content within a particular course could be found in abbreviated booklets called Cliff Notes. These abbreviated discourses were often used as study guides that would highlight the important points on the topic for the student. They were highly condensed versions of the subject content. We tend to like things simplified for us, so they were, and probably are, still popular for those wishing help to isolate the essential points to be gotten from the course. The simplification or condensation of issues has an inherent appeal. I found a joke which seems to be pertinent to this desire we have for condensing things. The telling of it goes like this: Once upon a time, a Chinese emperor gathered the greatest scholars in his kingdom to ask them to collect all the wisdom of the world. They were to do this and write it down for him so he could then read it and become wise. They come back ten years later and bring him a library of ten volumes—containing all the wisdom of the world. However, the Emperor was dismayed at the prospect of having to read so many books; so he sent his experts back with the goal of condensing it to something more manageable. In five years they come back with a single volume. The Emperor also considered this too long and ordered them to again condense it. They went away for a few months and came back with a single page—the wisdom of the world in five hundred words. This still did not satisfy the Emperor who wanted it whittled down even more. When they came back this time it was with one sentence. At this point, the teller of the joke is invited to insert their own sentence containing all the wisdom of the world. But to make it work; the sentence has to be something unexpected, maybe something ironic or even something cynical. The version of the joke which I first encountered used this sentence: "There's no such thing as a free lunch." That may or may not be true in the view of the world around us, although it seems many folks spend a lot of their life trying to find the venue which serves one so they can find that free lunch. Yet, if you move away from the world's view, you will find at a spiritual level, it's precisely NOT true. The most basic truth about God enforces this. With all that I am, I trust that God loves me, that God loves you, that God loves this ragged, broken old world. This is true because God loves, indeed God IS love. We don't earn it; we cannot deserve it; it is a gift, it IS free. But like the Emperor, we like to be given the short version of almost everything. The process of condensing things, this summing wisdom up into a few words, the radical digesting of truth to present a Readers Digest condensed version; this creating it into a easily remembered saying or motto is both important and dangerous. It really is both at the same time. It's important because people really do want and need the short version of it. People ache for the bottom line; they

want to know the essential core truth, the sum of what they really need to know. On the other hand, condensation is dangerous because as soon as you condense, you run the risk of reductionism. You are in danger of oversimplifying that which is inherently complex. If oversimplified too much you can lose details which are also needed to appreciate and understand. When you squeeze the truth down to a motto, to being easy to remember but too small, it can become just that—too small to contain all the meaning to make it helpful. Keeping that in mind, within scriptures there are many such condensations. One which often comes to mind is Jesus' response to the question: "What is the greatest commandment?" The Ten Commandments are fairly brief, but Jesus answer to that condensation question was simply to reduce the Ten Commandments and all of the 613 commandments traditionally counted in Hebrew Scriptures to only two. The two core commandments for Jesus can be stated like this: "Love God," "Love others." If fact, within the suggested readings for today, you can see that the Bible often does condense truth down to a manageable size in many places. Today's first example of condensation came in the call to worship based on Psalm 15. The Psalmist asks a bottom line type of question: "O Lord, who may abide in your tent? The condensed answer given is: "Those who walk blamelessly and do what is right." In our reading from the Hebrew Scriptures the prophet Micah asks another bottom line question to which we sincerely want an answer: "With what shall I come before the Lord?" Micah's ten-word answer is: "Do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God." The gospel reading today is from the first portion of the Sermon on the Mount. This is where Jesus is blessing those in the crowd gathered around him as he teaches them. But included in this blessing offered to the crowd is also Jesus' description of how things ought to be in the world. That is to say the "Kingdom of Heaven" would look like this. In this part of the Sermon on the Mount Jesus "blesses" what he's fundamentally calling people to become. His list includes humility of spirit, mercy, purity of heart, zeal for peace and hunger for righteousness. That is, he calls for those around him to "do what is right." The epistle reading from 1 Corinthians is also a summary, but it is not as brief as the other three. Paul proclaims the power of God over the wisdom of the world through the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. The world calls this foolishness, but to those who believe it is the demonstration of God's power and wisdom. Although each of these is shaped differently, each is a "Christianity 101" summary of the faith essentials. Each one employs a distinct language. Each makes use of a unique rhetoric, but...here is the basic point about Christianity, whether it's in Christianity 101 or the one listed as the 300 graduate level version...they all have one thing in common. There is only one thread which runs through them all. Every one of them is about how you treat other human beings. Each condensation of Christian faith insists that at the hot core of our faith is the ethics of relationships. Mercy is not an add-on only for those doing advanced study. Justice is not incidental, but essential. Compassion is not an option but a requirement. Love is at the center of our faith. That is not to say there are not other important aspects. What we believe matters; how we worship matters; Bible studies matter; Sunday School matters; even the loveliness of our building matters. But nothing matters like how we actually treat other people. As the lyrics from a favorite hymn go: "They'll know we are Christians by our love." That is certainly our hope. When we trust and appreciate the love of God for us, then it is no surprise what forms the content of Christianity 101. Christianity 101 tells us the physical condition of the church building is important. It does matter that the church's budget is more-or-less balanced. Fine liturgy matters very much. Good music is

important to help with the theology. Faithful theology is critical. But nothing—nothing but nothing—matters like simply doing the right thing to other human beings: love, justice, mercy kindness, compassion. Christianity 101. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.