

## **Grow: Moving to Maturity in the Faith**

Ephesians 3:14-21

The first of the year brings with it the prospect of a fresh start and brand new opportunities. Each year at this time, millions of Americans will make various new year's resolutions. According to the Journal of Clinical Psychology put out by the University of Scranton, the top ten resolutions last year were:

1. Lose weight
2. Getting organized
3. Spend less, save more
4. Enjoy life to the fullest
5. Staying fit and healthy
6. Learn something exciting
7. Quit bad habits
8. Help others
9. Fall in love
10. Spend more time with family

This same article stated that the percentage of Americans who made such resolutions was around 45%, nearly half of the population. However, the percentage of those people who were successful in achieving their resolution was only 8%.

Many begin the new year with the desire to achieve a goal, but very few possess the discipline to achieve it.

This same principle translates into the goals that people have for their lives in a spiritual sense. As believers, we ought to have some spiritual growth goals for this year. More than anything else in my life, I desire to become more like Jesus.

Growth in Christ is precisely what Paul emphasizes in his letter to the Ephesian church.

## **1. Spiritual growth is the REQUIREMENT of discipleship**

Though Jesus accepts a person where they are when they come to Him, make no mistake about it, He does not intend to leave them the way that He found them.

When I was a child in school, my two very favorite subjects were history and science. One of the things that every school child learns in science is the growth cycle of plants and trees. As with all living things, trees have a life cycle.

The life cycle of trees can be broken into five stages:

- Seed
- Sprout
- Sapling
- Seasoned
- Snag

This growth cycle is an analogy in Scripture to refer to the way that believers are to grow in their faith. Salvation is merely the beginning of a life of growth and maturing known as sanctification.

**2 Corinthians 3:18 - “And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.”**

Paul says believers are undergoing a process of transformation. The word he uses is ‘metamorphosis’ which is the word we use to describe the transformation of a caterpillar into a butterfly.

**Jerry Bridges** - *“Sanctification is the work of the Holy Spirit in us whereby our inner being is progressively changed, freeing us more and more from sinful traits and developing within us over time the virtues of Christlike character.”*

**Psalm 1:1-3 - “Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers; but his delight is in the law of the Lord, and on His law he meditates day and night. He is like a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither. In all that he does, he prospers.”**

The subject of sanctification and spiritual growth is not one that we give enough time and focus in the church today, and this explains much of the problem of rampant immaturity in the body of Christ.

Millions of Christians in the church today are suffering from arrested development, a condition that is simply defined as underdeveloped or constant immaturity. In fact, this is merely a reflection of the greater culture of immaturity around us.

Ours is the day of perpetual adolescence. Growing old does not mean the same thing as growing up.

**Christopher Noxon, New York Times** - *“More adults ages 18 to 49 watch the Cartoon Network than watch CNN.”*

According to the Entertainment Software Association, “the average video gamer was 18 in 1990; now he’s going on 30.” Statistics show us that 25% of American men aged 18-30 have never even left home.

Arrested development is a problem in today’s culture, and it is also a problem in today’s church. Immaturity runs amuck in the body of Christ, so much so, that spiritually mature believers who are reproducing other disciples are an anomaly.

Christ intends for His followers to grow to maturity. This is the constant refrain of the New Testament:

**1 Corinthians 13:11 - “When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I gave up childish ways.”**

**1 Peter 2:2 - “Like newborn infants, long for the pure spiritual milk, that by it you may grow up into salvation.”**

**2 Peter 3:17-18 - “You therefore, beloved, knowing this beforehand, take care that you are not carried away with the error of lawless people and lose your own stability. But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.”**

Believers are commanded to grow and mature in their faith.

Conformity to Christ is the goal of discipleship, and it is the work of God’s Spirit. However, in no way does this negate personal responsibility.

**John Wesley Adams - “Discipline is the bridge between faith and obedience.”**

We are afraid to talk about discipline in the church because we falsely assume that it sounds too much like legalism.

We don’t pursue spiritual discipline in the Christian life in order to be accepted; we do so because in Christ we already are accepted. It is grace that motivates us. We pursue spiritual growth in Christ through practicing spiritual discipline out of gratitude for the grace that has saved us, not as a self-advancing effort to earn acceptance.

Regardless of where you are in Christ, you are no more or no less loved by God. Those who are farther along in their spiritual growth are no more loved than those who are still babies in Christ. God doesn’t have a special category of MVP’s who He loves like a favorite pampered child.

Unfortunately, there are a lot of mistaken ideas about what spiritual growth means. For instance:

- It has nothing to do with our position in Christ
- It has nothing to do with God’s favor
- It has nothing to do with time

- It has nothing to do with knowledge
- It has nothing to do with activity
- It has nothing to do with prosperity

Simply put, spiritual growth is about matching up our position as believers with our practice as believers.

## 2. Spiritual growth is the REASON for the new birth

*“For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named.”*

Here in verse 14, we find Paul praying for the spiritual growth and maturity of the Ephesian church.

This verse marks a very important transition in Ephesians. Up until this verse, the apostle Paul has been emphasizing the basic truths of the Christian life such as who we are and what we have in Christ.

In other words, the first half of Ephesians deals primarily with the believer’s position in Christ. The New Testament concept of the believer’s union with Christ is one of the most important truths of Scripture.

**Sinclair Ferguson** - *“[This] is a doctrine which lies at the heart of the Christian life and is the truth to which the New Testament constantly returns.”*

In his letters, Paul frequently refers to the believer’s union with Christ as being “in Christ” and “in Him” and “in the Lord.” In fact, these three expressions occur no less than 164 times in the epistles.

In 1:1 through 3:13, Paul mentions some very wonderful truths about all that we have in Christ. The believer is:

- blessed with every spiritual blessing (1:3)
- chosen before the foundation of the world (1:4)

- predestined for adoption as sons (1:5)
- accepted in the beloved (1:6)
- obtained an inheritance (1:11)
- sealed with the Holy Spirit (1:13)
- made alive with Christ (2:5)
- seated with Christ in heavenly places (2:6)
- brought near by the blood of Christ (2:13)
- fellow citizen with the saints and members of God's household (2:19)
- a dwelling place for God (2:22)

Beginning in 3:14, the book of Ephesians deals with the believer's practice in Christ. My position determines my practice.

Spiritual growth, then, is me becoming in practice who I am in position.

My position is that I am in Christ, and this is salvation truth. My practice is that I am becoming more Christlike, and this is sanctification truth. Being a Christian is more than just coming to Christ; it is about growing and becoming more like in Him in every possible way. Why is a person saved to begin with? God saves you for the purpose of making you like Jesus.

**1 Peter 2:9 - "But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for His own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light."**

Spiritual growth is a byproduct of spiritual health. When something is healthy, it grows. When something is healthy, it is evident of life that is present and vibrant. When something is not healthy, its growth is stunted and stagnated. When something is not growing, it may mean that life is not present. Thus, lack of growth in one's life should cause that person to question whether or not life is present in the first place.

You cannot grow if you do not possess life. This is why professing believers are instructed to examine themselves.

Pursuing maturity through spiritual discipline is the obedient response to the grace of God in one's life. It is not something that one does in order to achieve life; it is something that one does because he or she has received life.

Growth is evidence of life. Corpses do not grow. Lifeless mannequins do not grow. Only those who have been given life by God's Spirit grow, and this growth is proof of their life.

### **3. Spiritual growth is ROOTED in the gospel of grace**

*“That according to the riches of His glory He may grant you to be strengthened with power through His Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith—that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have strength ”*

Notice that Paul is referring to a work of God's grace in the life of the believer—“that He may grant you.” Spiritual growth, then, is God working in me for His own glory and purpose.

Paul is not praying for God to give these riches to believers, but that He would grant believers to be strengthened by God according to the riches they already possessed. He wants the Ephesians to live lives that correspond to the spiritual wealth they have in Christ. Both salvation and sanctification are by God's grace. Though spiritual growth involves our all-out effort, it is firmly anchored in the grace of God.

**Titus 2:11-12 - “For the grace of God has appeared bringing salvation for all people, training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age.”**

The grace of God that saves us also disciplines us to live godly lives in Christ Jesus. The very same grace that brings salvation also trains us to live lives that are pleasing to God. God's grace goes to work in the life of the believer, transforming him or her into the image of Christ.

Spiritual growth begins with being strengthened with power through God's Spirit in the inner man.

Spiritual immaturity fails to understand this first step toward growth. Many believers languish in immaturity because the inner man is not strengthened with power through God's Spirit, though they have every opportunity. As a result, they suffer, the church suffers, and the world suffers.

Humanity's problem is not with the outer man, but in the inner man. Salvation and sanctification deals with this problem.

**2 Corinthians 4:16 - "So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day."**

Spiritual growth, then, can be defined as the decreasing frequency of sin. The more we exercise our spiritual muscles, yielding to the Spirit's control of our lives, the less sin is present. When the strength of God increased in the inner man, sin will be decreasing. The closer we come to God in the inner man, the further we go from sin.

Grace motivates spiritual growth, not legalistic performance.

**Jerry Bridges** - *"We are performance-oriented by nature, and our culture, and sometimes our upbringing, reinforces this legalistic mindset. All too often a child's acceptance by his or her parents is based on the child's performance, and this certainly tends to be true in our society. We carry this same type of thinking into our relationship with God."*

My position is never affected by my performance. Paul said that it is the very same grace that brought us salvation in the first place that disciplines us and motivates us to mature in the faith.

This means that all our responses to God's dealings with us and all our practice of the spiritual disciplines must be based on the knowledge that God is dealing with us in grace.

This is why we must never move past the gospel in the Christian life.

Notice in verse 17 that the purpose of our being strengthened with power through His Spirit in the inner man is so that Christ may dwell in our hearts through faith.

This is a reference to the life of Christ in the believer.

**“Dwell”** - *compound word meaning to inhabit*

The idea is not simply that of being inside the house, but of being at home there in a comfortable fashion.

Jesus Christ is not truly “at home” in a person’s heart until the inner being submits to the strengthening of His Spirit.

**John MacArthur** - *“In his booklet, My Heart Christ’s Home, Robert Munger pictures the Christian life as a house, through which Jesus goes from room to room. In the library, which is the mind, Jesus finds teach and all sorts of worthless things, which He proceeds to throw out and replace with His Word. In the dining room of appetite He finds many sinful desires listed on a worldly menu. In the place of such things as prestige, materialism, and lust He puts humility, meekness, love, and all the other virtues for which believers are to hunger and thirst. He goes through the living room of fellowship, where He finds many worldly companions and activities, through the workshop, where only toys are being made, into the closet, where hidden sins are kept, and so on through the entire house. Only when He had cleaned every room, closet, and corner of sin and foolishness could He settle down and be at home.”*

I am in Christ, and Christ is in me.

**Colossians 1:27-29** - **“To them God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ.”**

Paul says in verses 17-19 that the result of this growth in the inner man manifests itself in being rooted and grounded in love. When Christ consumes our life in maturity, we become rooted and grounded in love.

**John 13:34-35 - “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.”**

True spiritual growth is growth in love. This is the fruit of the Spirit being produced in the believer's life.

Love manifests itself through:

- Selflessness
- Sacrifice
- Service
- Submission

When we are rooted and grounded in love, Paul says then we are able to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth of the love of Christ.

This refers to the vastness and magnitude of God's love:

- The breadth of love is seen in God's acceptance of both Gentile and Jew in Christ (2:11-18).
- The length of love is seen in the fact that believer's have been granted a salvation that will last through all eternity (1:4-5).
- The height of love is seen in God's having blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ (1:3).
- The depth of love is seen in God's reaching down to love and redeem those who are dead in their trespasses and sins (2:1-3).

#### **4. Spiritual growth is the RESULT of God's Spirit and my submission**

*"...that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. Now to Him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that ask or think, according to the power at work within us, to Him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen."*

To be filled with the fullness of God means to be totally dominated and controlled by His Spirit, which means that you are emptied of self.

Paul is referring to the believer's growth in Christ.

Given the struggle that we have with sin in this life, it would seem that true spiritual growth is well out of our reach. However, Paul reminds us that it is according to the Spirit's power which is at work within us. In chapters 4-6, he calls on believers to do some things to ensure their growth. The point is that God's grace frees me to pursue Christlikeness, and God's Spirit empowers me and conforms me into Christ's image, but works in conjunction with my will.

Spiritual growth demands my submission and obedience.

In his book, [The Discipline of Grace](#), author Jerry Bridges gives a great illustration of this:

During the long years of the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union, a Russian air force pilot named Viktor Belenko flew his fighter jet from a base in Russia to an American base in Japan seeking asylum. Belenko was flown to America where he was interrogated, given a new identity, and in due time given citizenship as a resident of the United States. Belenko changed kingdoms. Belenko was given a new identity and a new status. No longer was he Russian; he was now an American. No longer was he under the rule of an oppressive and totalitarian government. Now, as an American citizen, he was free to experience all of the advantages and resources of living in a free and prosperous country.

Keep in mind that the former Russian pilot was still the same person with the same personality, habits, and tendencies. The difference now was that he had a new identity and a new position or status.

As a result of his newfound status, he now had the opportunity to grow as an American citizen, to discard the mindset of someone living under bondage, and to put off the attitudes of a person who lived under the heel of a despotic regime. He was given all the resources he needed to make a successful transition as an American citizen.

Viktor Belenko died to his old identity as a Russian citizen and was “made alive” in a new identity as an American citizen.

His experience illustrates to some degree what happened to us as believers when we died to sin and were made alive to God. When I died to sin, I died to my former status wherein I was under bondage to the reign of sin. Through faith in Jesus Christ I was granted citizenship in God’s Kingdom, and through my union with Christ, I was furnished with all the resources I needed to become in practice what I became in position! Now, I am free to grow and move on to maturity.

- Are you trusting in Jesus Christ as your Savior who has been preached to you through the gospel?
- Is there any evidence that you have died to sin and have been made alive to God?
- Is the grace of God at work in you to discipline you so that you are growing spiritually?