

Grow: The Supreme Mark of Growth

Ephesians 3:17-21

What is the greatest evidence that something is healthy? It will show signs of growth. This is true in the physical world, and this is also true in the church of Jesus Christ. The church that is healthy will be made up of believers who are growing spiritually and are reproducing through multiplication.

There are two false ideas about growth that many believers have:

- the idea that growth is BENEATH them
- the idea that growth is BEYOND them

No matter who you are or where you are in your life as a believer, you are to be pursuing Christlikeness and spiritual growth.

The premier sign of growth in the Christian life is love. Such love is seen in a vertical dimension (love for God) as well as a horizontal dimension (love for others).

Matthew 22:37-40 - “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.”

Spiritual growth evidences itself in an ever increasing love for God and others.

Paul wants the Ephesian church to understand this, and so he prays for their spiritual growth to be seen through increasing love in their life.

Baker’s Encyclopedia of the Bible - *“[Love is] the first and last word in Christian theology and ethics. It is therefore important to understand clearly this increasingly ambiguous term.”*

There were four words in Greek that referred to love--storge, philia, eros, and agape. The word Paul uses in this passage that is translated as ‘love’ is the Greek word

'agape.' 'Agape' love is one of the rarest words in ancient Greek literature, but remarkably one of the most common in the New Testament. Unlike our English word love, it never refers to romantic or physical love. The word 'eros' was used for this, and it does not appear in the New Testament. Nor does it refer to mere sentiment, a pleasant feeling about something or someone. It does not mean close friendship or brotherly love, for which 'philia' is used. Nor does 'agape' mean charity, a term that has long been associated only with giving to the needy.

J.I. Packer - *"The Greek word agape (love) seems to have been virtually a Christian invention -- a new word for a new thing (apart from about twenty occurrences in the Greek version of the Old Testament, it is almost non-existent before the New Testament). Agape draws its meaning directly from the revelation of God in Christ. It is not a form of natural affection, however, intense, but a supernatural fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22). It is a matter of will rather than feeling (for Christians must love even those they dislike -- Matt. 5:44-48). It is the basic element in Christ-likeness."*

The world talks about 'falling' in love, equating it with nothing more than emotion. God says that we are to be growing in love.

How do I know whether or not I am growing in love?

C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* - *"Do not waste your time bothering whether you 'love' your neighbor; act as if you did. As soon as we do this, we find one of the great secrets. When you are behaving as if you loved someone, you will presently come to love him. If you injure someone you dislike, you will find yourself disliking him more. If you do him a good turn, you will find yourself disliking him less."*

Within that quote, C.S. Lewis is reminding us that biblical love is not a feeling but is a fact. It is an intentional act of the will.

We learn to play the game through practice. A person cannot grow in love without loving, much in the same way that an athlete cannot grow in strength apart from the gym.

In his prayer for believers, Paul emphasizes some truths about how increasing in love is the hallmark of spiritual growth.

1. Growing believers must be ROOTED in love

“So that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith--that you, being rooted and grounded in love...”

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.

Something that is growing has to first of all be rooted and grounded in fertile soil.

Soil is extremely important to the health and growth of plants. Most plants grow by absorbing nutrients from the soil. Their ability to do this depends on the nature of the soil. Not all soil is conducive to growth.

Jesus illustrates this in the Parable of the Sower:

Luke 8:5-8 - “A sower went out to sow his seed. And as he sowed, some fell along the path and was trampled underfoot, and the birds of the air devoured it. And some fell on the rock, and as it grew up, it withered away, because it had no moisture. And some fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up with it and choked it. And some fell into good soil and grew and yielded a hundredfold. As He said these things, He called out, He who has ears to hear, let him hear.”

A few verses later, Jesus explains the parable to His disciples:

Luke 8:11-15 - “Now the parable is this: The seed is the word of God. The ones along the path are those who have heard; then the devil comes and takes away

the word from their hearts, so that they may not believe and be saved. And the ones on the rock are those who, when they hear the word, receive it with joy. But these have no root; they believe for a while, and in time of testing fall away. And as for what fell among the thorns, they are those who hear, but as they go on their way they are choked by the cares and riches and pleasures of life, and their fruit does not mature. As for that in the good soil, they are those who, hearing the word, hold it fast in an honest and good heart, and bear fruit with patience.”

Just as a healthy, growing plant is rooted in rich and fertile soil, so also is a healthy, growing disciple rooted in love.

Romans 5:5 - “God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.”

God first does a work in a person’s life through the new birth whereby He pours His love into their heart at salvation. The idea is that this love, then, is foundational for growth.

“Rooted” - *to become strengthened, with focus upon the source of such strength*

“Grounded” - *to lay the foundation; to provide a firm basis for belief or practice*

Colossians 2:6-7 - “Therefore, as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in Him, rooted and built up in Him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving.”

Warren Wiersbe - *“One of the most important questions a Christian can ask himself is, “From what do I draw my nourishment and my stability?” If there is to be power in the Christian life, then there must be depth. The roots must go deeper and deeper into the love of Christ.”*

To be rooted and grounded in love means that God has first poured His love and life into us through salvation. When Jesus Christ makes Himself at home in our lives, He begins to display His own love in us and through us, and the result is that we are settled on a strong foundation of love.

2. Growing believers show a REFLECTION of love

“...may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.”

Believers are rooted in love so that they might grow in love and reflect love to others.

Love is the very first fruit of the Spirit that is mentioned in Galatians 5:22-23. Without love, none of the other fruit is present. It is the grace from which the others grow.

Consider:

- Where love is present, joy is present
- Where love is present, peace is present
- Where love is present, patience is present
- Where love is present, kindness is present
- Where love is present, goodness is present
- Where love is present, faithfulness is present
- Where love is present, gentleness is present
- Where love is present, self-control is present

Seen in this light, love is not so much a character trait as it is the inner disposition of soul that produces them all.

George Bethune - *“[Love is] a holy, abiding and vigorous spirit, which rules the whole man, ever directing him to the humble and loving fulfillment of all his duties to God and man.”*

It is an attitude which manifests itself through actions.

The love of God that we are to be rooted and grounded in is selfless and sacrificial by nature.

John 15:13 - “Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends.”

Romans 5:8 - “God shows His love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”

Love manifests itself through:

- Selfless attitude
- Sacrificial action
- Service availability
- Submissive to authority

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.

“Comprehend” - *to grasp or to seize upon*

The idea is that of apprehension vs. comprehension.

Our modern word “comprehend” carries the idea of mentally understanding something; while apprehend suggests laying hold of it for yourself. In other words, it is very possible to understand something but not personally make it your own.

This apprehension 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)

Paul prays for believers to comprehend this love, and he says in verse 19 that he desires for them "to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge."

"Know" - *speaks of an experiential knowledge*

Love experienced will become love expressed. Spiritual growth means that I grow in my understanding of:

- Christ's love FOR me

This is assurance. Paul prays for the Ephesians to have strength in order to comprehend the magnitude of God's love for them in Christ.

Romans 8:35-39 - **"Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword?...No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."**

Believers who are not fully aware that they are loved by Christ and secure in Christ will not pursue growth in their lives.

- Christ's love IN me

This is attitude. There is nobody that I am unable to love, because Christ's love abides within me as His disciple.

Jerry Bridges - *"To recognize that there is someone I do not love is to say to God, 'I do not love You enough to love that person.'"*

- Christ's love THROUGH me

This is action. True love always go to work!

1 John 3:16-18 - “By this we know love, that He laid down His life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers. But if anyone has the world’s goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God’s love abide in him? Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth.”

Love rolls up its sleeves and demonstrates itself through selfless actions.

3. Growing believers experience the RESULTS of love

“...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 we 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.”

As these believers grow in understanding and apprehension of Christ’s love, Paul prays that they be filled with all the fullness of God.

“Filled” - *to be under the influence; controlled*

Ephesians 5:18 - “And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit.”

The idea is that growth in their lives will result in greater control and influence by the Spirit of their everyday lives.

It is tragic when Christians use the wrong measurements in examining their own spiritual lives. People in the church often compare themselves with others around them and view themselves as being better or not as good. The true measure, however, is Christ. The goal is His fullness.

The means of growing Christlike is being filled with the Spirit!

Being filled with His fullness doesn't mean that I get more of God; it means that God gets more of me.

The point of this passage is that the result of the experiential love of Christ is spiritual growth in the believer. This is all made possible by the power which is at work in us.

He is able to do abundantly more through us because of His power working in us.

Warren Wiersbe - *“What does it mean to have the Holy Spirit empower the inner man? It means that our spiritual faculties are controlled by God, and we are exercising them and growing in the Word (Heb. 5:12–14). It is only when we yield to the Spirit and let Him control the inner man that we succeed in living to the glory of God. This means feeding the inner man the Word of God, praying and worshiping, keeping clean, and exercising the senses by loving obedience.”*