

Following Jesus Requires Growth

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[0:00] In Matthew 16, Peter makes his well-known confession. Jesus asked, who do people say that the Son of Man is?

And some thought he was John the Baptist. Some thought he was Elijah or Jeremiah or one of the prophets. But then Jesus asked his disciples, well, what about you?

Who do you say that I am? And Peter answered, you are the Christ, the Son of the living God. To which Jesus replied, blessed are you, Simon Barjona, for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven.

And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against me. It was a great confession on Peter's part because it was truth.

It is the truth upon which Christ builds his church. It's a truth upon which Christ is still building his church. And at this point in Peter's story, we may be tempted to pat Peter on the back and say, that a boy, you've made it.

[1:18] You've reached maturity. You may have been confused about some things in the past, but now you get it. You've grown into the kind of disciple you ought to be. But then Matthew's narration continues.

We're told from that time Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes and be killed and on the third day be raised.

And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, far be it from you, Lord. This shall never happen to you. But he turned and said to Peter, get behind me, Satan.

You are a hindrance to me, for you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man. As it happened, Peter still had some growing up to do.

I mean, he's essentially denying the need for Christ's death and resurrection. And that's the heart of the gospel. That's as fundamental to our faith as it gets.

[2:28] And so even after Peter's great confession regarding the identity of Christ, he argues, no, Lord, you can't suffer and die. This can never happen.

Well, as Jesus makes clear, that was of the devil. It was a foolish statement, to say the very least. It was immature. It was sinful even. Obviously, Peter still had some growing up to do.

Now, compare that conversation with Peter's bold preaching in Acts chapter 2. In Acts chapter 2, Peter is not speaking in a small, relatively private group made up of only Jesus and his first disciples.

Peter is standing up before thousands of people. And keep in mind, the threat of violence is actually very real because as Peter has seen with his own eyes, Jewish leaders were willing to arrest and execute Jesus.

What might they do to his followers? Even so, listen to this sermon that Peter preaches to anyone and everyone who happens to hear his voice.

[3:41] He says, and this is Acts 2.22, Men of Israel, hear these words. Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with mighty works and wonders and signs that God did through him in your midst, as you yourselves know, this Jesus delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men.

God raised him up, loosing the pangs of death because it was not possible for him to be held by it. He continues, but in verse 36, he concludes his sermon this way, Let all the house of Israel therefore know for certain that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified.

Now that's a pretty stark contrast. Peter goes from denying the need for Christ's death to boldly preaching that his death was the plan of God before time itself.

So not only has Peter's conviction and his understanding changed, but his entire demeanor has changed. Only weeks ago, he denied even knowing Christ.

You know, when the young servant girl came and asked him following Jesus' arrest, he saw what they were doing to Christ and to his shame. He was afraid to admit that he was a disciple.

[5 : 11] Yet here, in Acts 2, you can't detect any apprehension at all. This is the truth about Jesus, Peter effectively says, and I want everyone to know.

I want everyone to know it regardless of what happens to me. So again, we come to a point in Peter's story when we may be tempted to say, Peter, you've made it.

You've arrived. Welcome to spiritual maturity. Well, he had certainly grown. That's undeniable. But if we continue reading, we discover that he had yet more growing to do.

Acts 10 is a good example. Peter falls into a trance, and he sees all kinds of animals and reptiles and birds, and a voice says to him, Rise, Peter, kill and eat.

And once again, Peter argues with the Lord. He says, By no means, Lord, for I have never eaten anything that is common or unclean.

[6 : 18] Evidently, Peter sees this as a kind of test. He thinks God wants to know whether I would eat an unclean animal. Unclean, according to the old law. And I suppose it is a kind of test, but one which Peter fails.

The voice says to him, What God has made clean, do not call common. By common, the Lord is talking about something that's desecrated or ceremonially unclean.

Well, according to Old Testament law, Peter was correct. These animals were forbidden. He should not eat them. But here we see some of that tension in the days of the early church, especially in the book of Acts.

Christ not only made sinners clean through his death, but he also made these various animals clean through his death by fulfilling the law. In other words, things had changed.

The Christians' relationship to the ceremonial laws in the Old Testament had changed. And Peter and the other apostles were still learning to adapt. They're still learning their relationship to the law.

[7 : 25] They are still growing in their understanding. And by the way, that's a very good reason why we need to be careful about building our theology exclusively from the book of Acts.

Acts represents a transitional period for the church. Even the great apostle Peter, we see. He's still learning. So before we draw any conclusions from the book of Acts, we may want to consult the rest of the New Testament and see what those apostles had to say after all of these lessons were learned.

But as we see here in Acts 10, Peter is still learning. He's still growing. He's still maturing. Now over the last six weeks, we've thought about what it means to follow Jesus.

And last week, I said that following Jesus requires change. God does not save us because we have changed. He saves us to change us.

He saves us to be conformed to the image of His Son. As we follow Christ, He works to make us increasingly holy. We are set apart from this world, and we are set apart from what we once were, little by little.

[8 : 43] Meanwhile, the Bible shows us that following Christ is a process of growth. It's spiritual growth. It's growth in our understanding.

It's growth in our conviction. It's growth in our maturity, in our wisdom. In his book, *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church*, Mark Deaver writes, a healthy church has a pervasive concern with church growth. Not simply growing in numbers, but growing members. A church full of growing Christians is the kind of church growth I want as a pastor. Some today seem to think that one can be a baby Christian for a whole lifetime.

Growth is seen to be an optional extra for particularly zealous disciples. But be very careful about taking that line of thought. Growth is a sign of life.

Growing trees are living trees, and growing animals are living animals. When something stops growing, it dies. Now in just a moment, we'll look at Ephesians chapter 4, but the necessity of spiritual growth is a constant theme throughout, particularly the New Testament.

[9 : 58] In Colossians 1.28, Paul says, Christ we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom that we may present everyone mature in Christ.

For this I toil, struggling with all His energy that He powerfully works within me. So what does Paul consider the aim of his entire ministry?

Why does he go from city to city preaching the gospel? Why does he continue teaching groups of people, certain churches, for months or even years at a time?

Why does he put his life at risk to do all of this? What's the point? Well, he says he does it to present everyone mature in Christ.

He says he uses all of that energy that God works within him for this reason. He does it as a means of growing the church. Yes, they grow in numbers, but that's not what he's talking about.

[10:59] He's talking about their spiritual maturity. He works to ensure that each believer grows up in Christ. I was conversing with a young man online earlier this week, and he was a bit of a prodigal son who had recently returned to the church, and he was very excited.

And he shared a link to his church's website with me, and I jotted down what I read on the homepage. It says, Crossroads is a community of people from very diverse backgrounds.

We are all at different stages of learning what it means to live like Jesus. Whether you are still exploring faith or have been a Christian for a long time, you will be welcome at Crossroads.

We believe we all have a next step to take. And that's very true. We all have a next step to take.

Just as we will not all become perfectly holy in this life, we will not attain perfect maturity in this life.

[12:02] We will always have more to learn. We will always have more growing up to do. And that's the point. You see, in most cases, we don't need to be convinced that we're not perfectly holy.

We know. You know, no sooner than I read in 1 Corinthians 13 that love is not irritable, I get irritated.

I get irritated over silly things. My three-year-old son has not stopped talking for 30 minutes straight. And that probably wouldn't bother me so much, except he's been asking me questions for 30 minutes straight and not pausing long enough to ever give me a chance to answer.

And so I get a little irritated. And then I remember what I just read in Scripture, and now I feel guilty because I have failed yet again. I failed to love my son as I should.

I know. I know I'm not perfectly holy, and I suspect you do too. Most of us don't have to be convinced of that. And this is why I've chosen to separate the subject of growth from the subject of sanctification and holiness we discussed last time.

[13:08] They very much go hand in hand. But even when we recognize our shortcomings regarding holiness, we may not see our pressing need for spiritual growth.

We may think, you know, I know everything I need to know. I just need to get better at putting it into practice. But the truth is, we don't know everything.

And furthermore, spiritual growth is about more than what we need to know, with our minds, that is. This is a matter that pervades all of the Christian life.

At no point should we ever think, I'm done. I've grown as much as I can. Let me give you just a sample of what the Bible says about this.

Peter concludes his second epistle this way. So if you flip all the way to the end of 2 Peter, we read, Therefore, beloved, since you are waiting for these, the new heaven and the new earth, be diligent to be found by him without spot or blemish and at peace.

[14:21] And count the patience of our Lord as salvation, just as our beloved brother Paul also wrote to you according to the wisdom given him, as he does in all his letters when he speaks in them of these matters.

There are some things in them that are hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction as they do the other scriptures. 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, but grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

To him be the glory both now and to the day of eternity. Amen. So the last word Peter writes to these believers is, first of all, don't be carried away by false teachings.

Don't be deceived. Instead, grow. Grow in, number one, the grace of our Lord, and number two, the knowledge of our Lord.

You see, it's more than knowledge. We also see that Peter doesn't present mere knowledge of the truth as the antithesis of deception.

[15:35] Right? Rather, he says, growing, not just knowing, but growing in knowledge and grace is the opposite of deception. That's the solution. It's not as though there's this one thing we can learn

or this one level of understanding we can reach that it's going to prevent us from ever being deceived again.

No, Peter says we must be growing, always growing. Like Mark Deaver said, when something stops growing, it what? It dies.

If we stop growing in grace, if we stop growing in knowledge, we put ourselves in grave danger. Colossians 1, starting at verse 9.

And so, from the day we heard, we have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will and all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to Him, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God, being strengthened with all power according to His glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy, giving thanks to the Father who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in light.

Now notice how Paul defines our growth as Christians. We are being filled with the knowledge of God's will. We are being filled with spiritual wisdom and understanding.

[17:07] And this in turn helps us to walk in a manner worthy of our calling and helps us to become more holy, more pleasing to God. As we grow, Paul says, we bear more spiritual fruit, which reveals itself through our good works, our conduct.

We increase our knowledge of God. It's not merely that we increase our knowledge of doctrines A, B, and C, but we grow to know God Himself better and better.

And this growth in turn strengthens us. It produces patience and endurance. It helps us as we wait for the second coming of Christ.

It also increases our thankfulness. All of this is wrapped up in what Paul said. In 2 Peter 1, starting at verse 3, Peter writes, His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness.

through the knowledge of Him who called us to His own glory and excellence, by which He has granted to us His precious and very great promises, that through them you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped from the corruption that is in the world because of sinful desire.

[18:27] For this very reason, make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue, and virtue with knowledge, and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with steadfastness, and steadfastness with godliness, and godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love.

For if these qualities are yours and are increasing, they keep you from being ineffective or unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.

For whoever lacks these qualities is so nearsighted that he is blind, having forgotten that he was cleansed from his former sins. Therefore, brothers, be all the more diligent to confirm your calling and election, for if you practice these qualities, you will never fall.

Do you see how the Bible presents spiritual growth as inevitable among Christians? It doesn't really suggest there are two kinds of Christians, growing Christians and non-growing Christians.

Instead, the biblical authors, namely Paul and Peter, as we've seen, assume Christians will be growing. And if not, both Paul and Peter actually call into question, give reason for doubting their salvation.

[19:51] Paul expects believers to be bearing fruit more and more as time passes. Peter says, if you don't have these qualities, he mentions, and if these qualities aren't increasing, you must be spiritually blind.

So he implores his readers, assuming they were chosen and called by God, to confirm their calling and election. How so? By pursuing these qualities and the increase of these qualities with diligence. both Paul and Peter say, Christians should be growing. I'll give you one more example before we turn over to Ephesians 4, 1 Peter 2.

It begins, So put away all malice and all deceit and hypocrisy and envy and all slander. Like newborn infants long for the pure spiritual milk that by it you may grow up into salvation.

If indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good. Again, we see that expectation that true Christians will grow.

[21:07] But more than that, Peter seems to define the totality of the Christian life as one of growth. We may begin as newborn infants but we grow up with the proper nourishment.

We grow up. Specifically, he says, we grow up into salvation. Now, I don't know if anyone here is reading from the King James Version but you won't see that phrase into salvation. And that's because it's a phrase that went missing in some of the later hand-copied manuscripts of the Bible. As the Bible was copied generation after generation, someone either intentionally or unintentionally left that phrase out.

And if I had to guess why someone may have intentionally left that phrase out, it's probably because it seems to create this weird theological challenge for us.

How do people who are already saved grow into salvation? If we have salvation, how do we grow into it? Well, I don't know that it's all that complicated.

[22 : 12] You know, sometimes we'll buy clothes for the kids and we'll find out that those clothes are a little too big. And so, rather than throwing those clothes out or taking them back to the store, we just hold on to them.

We have them. We possess them. We're just waiting for our kids to grow into them. Right? Similarly, we grow into our salvation.

We have salvation, but we are not yet what we should be. We are not yet what we will be. And it stands to reason that if we have life, we will be growing.

So I said that would be the final example, but let me give you one more. At the end of Hebrews 5, verse 11, Hebrews 5, 11.

We read, About this we have much to say, and it is hard to explain since you have become dull of hearing. For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the basic principles of the oracles of God.

[23 : 25] You need milk, not solid food. For everyone who lives on milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness since he is a child. But solid food is for the mature, for those who have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil.

Now, I won't say much about this passage, but again, we see this concept of growth among Christians, right? There's an expectation of growth. In fact, according to the author of Hebrews, especially as we read this passage in its context, a lack of growth is unsettling.

It's spiritually dangerous. A lack of growth is not just a matter of people stalling out at a certain level, right? It's not as though they grew to a certain point and then they just sort of stopped.

The warning in Hebrews is that a lack of growth would actually suggest a lack of life. In other words, if we're not growing, our lack of growth would indicate death.

Living things grow. So if we're not growing, what does that tell us? It would seem to indicate death. Complete absence of life. With that, let's turn over to Ephesians chapter 4.

[24 : 44] Ephesians chapter 4. In verse 7, Paul says, grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ's gift.

He says, all believers have been called into one body. We are called into unity with fellow believers and Christ has gifted each one of us a measure of His grace. We're all equipped to play a vital role in this body.

Skipping ahead, starting at verse 11, he says, and He gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God to mature manhood to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ so that we may no longer be children tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness and deceitful schemes.

Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into Him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.

Now I want to divide this text into five parts. I want to draw five points out of it and you'll find that much of this is closely connected to some of our previous lessons on following Christ.

[26 : 23] Obviously, the subject of spiritual growth is intimately joined to the subject of sanctification, which we considered last time, but we also see something here about relying on the Word of God.

We saw some of that in other passages I read. We also see something about being a part of the church in this text. In fact, that's Paul's primary focus here.

We need the church to follow Christ because, if for no other reason, we need the church for spiritual growth. We can't do this alone. Now you'll notice how this passage progresses.

Paul begins with what is essentially our foundation for spiritual growth, which in turn equips us, which builds us up, which ensures stability, which ultimately leads to maturity.

So first of all, Paul points to the Word of God as being foundational for spiritual growth. He says, Christ gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds, and teachers.

[27 : 33] Now I won't take time to explain each of these ministry roles or talk about their distinctions, instead I'll simply ask, what do they all have in common? And the answer is, they all served in various ways to communicate the Word of God.

Right? According to Paul, this is where spiritual growth begins for us. It begins with learning about God and learning His will. That's what Peter said at the end of his second epistle.

That's essentially what he said in 1 Peter 2. Like newborn infants, long for the pure spiritual milk that is of the Word that by it you may grow. That's what Hebrews 5 said.

We need the oracles of God to grow. We need His utterances. We need His words. We need to hear from Him. We need to learn from Him. We need to learn about Him.

And that's what the apostles did. That's what the prophets did. They communicated the will of God. They taught the Christian faith. Today we have evangelists and pastor teachers who proclaim the Word of God to us.

[28 : 42] And when they do, what are they trying to accomplish? This leads us to the second point. The first thing is the Word of God is foundational for our spiritual growth.

Second, spiritual growth requires both learning and doing. verse 12. He gave shepherds and teachers to equip the saints for the work of ministry.

So the pastor teachers, and I phrase it that way because I believe Paul is referring to two dimensions of the same role. So it's pastor-teacher, shepherd-teacher.

The pastor teachers equip the church for the work of ministry. ministry. They themselves are not doing all of the ministry. You see that? They are equipping others for the work of ministry to do it right along with them.

And by ministry, Paul simply means service. Paul is saying that pastors equip us to be servants. How do they equip us?

[29 : 49] All Scripture is breathed out by God and is profitable for teaching that the man of God may be equipped for every good work.

I mean, it's really, it's right there in their job title. They are shepherds and teachers. They teach the Word of God, which means our spiritual growth is dependent upon learning from them.

Pastors train us for service. But we don't want to stop at learning because serving, of course, requires doing. They're teaching us, they're equipping us to serve and we must do at some point. We grow by learning and doing. We learn so we can do. And frankly, we don't want to neglect either one. James writes, For if anyone is a hearer of the Word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks intently at his natural face in a mirror.

For he looks at himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like. But the one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty and perseveres, being no hearer who forgets but a doer who acts, he will be blessed in his doing.

[31 : 01] Obviously, we want to be hearers of the Word. You may remember the Bereans in Acts 17 who were more noble, at least in part, because they received the Word with all eagerness.

But to James' point, hearing the Word without doing the Word is a kind of self-deception. You know, one of the things the Bible does is shows us our shortcomings, right?

So the person who hears the Word but doesn't do anything about it is like a man, according to James, that looks at himself in a mirror and he quickly forgets what he looks like, you know?

He looks in the mirror right after he's had dinner and he sees he's got a chunk of food caught between his teeth and then he walks away and forgets that it's there.

He just saw it but he forgot all about it. You know, what's the point of looking in the mirror? Why have the mirror at all? We learn from the Word to do the Word.

[32 : 05] Our pastors equip us to do the work of ministry. And this becomes a beautiful and mutually beneficial thing when every member of the church is in fact learning and doing.

You know, we become like an orchestra. You know, one instrument may sound nice but many instruments playing in harmony with one another is even better.

Which brings us to the third point. So first, the Word of God is foundational for our spiritual growth. Second, spiritual growth requires both learning and doing.

And third, individual growth makes the entire body grow. And, at the same time, individual growth cannot happen without the body.

This is an interesting facet of what Paul says here in Ephesians 4. Notice Paul's connection between unity and maturity. Unity is essentially how the chapter begins and in some ways that's what this entire letter is about.

[33 : 12] But Paul gets even more direct in verse 13. So, pastors, equip us for ministry for building up the body of Christ until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God to mature manhood to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.

So, according to Paul, we can't achieve maturity without this unity as a sort of base. In other words, we can't really grow like we need to grow apart from the church, apart from fellow believers.

A few weeks ago, we considered our need for the church and I mentioned that we don't find many explicit commands to go to church. But we find many, many commands that we cannot keep unless we are an active part of the church.

For example, how much time do I have? Love one another. This command occurs at least 16 times in the New Testament if I've counted them correctly.

Be devoted to one another. Honor one another. Live in harmony with one another. Build up one another. Be like-minded towards one another. Accept one another.

[34 : 31] Admonish one another. Greet one another. Care for one another. Serve one another. Bear one another's burdens. Forgive one another. Be patient with one another.

Be kind and compassionate to one another. Speak to one another with psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs. Submit to one another. Look to the interests of one another.

Bear with one another. Teach one another. Comfort one another. Encourage one another. Exhort one another. Do you see the theme? You're following that, right? Stir up one another to love and good works.

Show hospitality to one another. Employ the gifts that God has given us for the benefit of one another. Clothe yourselves with humility towards one another. Pray for one another.

Confess your faults to one another. And I eventually stopped my list because I think you get the idea. All of these commands are given in the context of the local church in the body of Christ.

[35 : 33] And according to Paul here in Ephesians, one of the reasons we must be together is that we can't grow alone without the unity of the body of Christ.

That is, fellow believers under the leadership of pastors and teachers, we can't reach maturity.

That's what's implied here.

Fourth, spiritual growth needs stability. At the same time, spiritual growth leads to greater stability. Verse 14, so that we may no longer be children tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness and deceitful schemes.

Now, I don't need to tell you that we are under constant assault as believers. If we're not growing as we should, we're in trouble. Fifth and final, our spiritual growth is ultimately into Christ.

[36 : 41] Notice what Paul says in verse 15 again. We are to grow up in every way into not what, but whom. Into Him who is the head into Christ.

Now, this is a point I've made several times throughout this series and I'll make it again because it is perhaps the most important thing I could say. When we think about following Christ and what it means to follow Christ, Christ is the most important thing.

Spiritual growth is not primarily about knowledge and what we know or obedience or wisdom. We are talking about growth into Christ Himself.

Listen to what Andrew Randall says. We're growing into closer relationship with Jesus and deeper understanding of who He is and how He thinks and what He desires and what will honor Him.

It's growth into greater Christ-likeness. And then he offers the following illustration. He says, there's a wonderful moment in the Chronicles of Narnia by C.S. Lewis when Lucy encounters Aslan, the Christ figure, having not seen him for a while.

[38 : 05] Lucy says, Aslan, you're bigger. He answers, that is because you are older, little one. He says, not because you are. He says, I am not.

But every year you grow, you will find me bigger. Randall says, and we'll close with this, this is what it means to grow as a Christian.

As we grow, Christ gets bigger. Or rather, our vision of Christ expands. And our capacity to see Him enlarges so that we come to see more and more of the reality of who He is and who He has been all along.

We find in Him greater glory, deeper love, more satisfying joy than we ever thought possible. There is so much more of Him to know.

And growing in that knowledge is its own reward. Amen. Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we thank You that we can know Christ Your Son and know You through Him.

[39 : 18] And I pray that You would draw us closer and closer to Yourself each and every day. Help us to know more of what we need to know. Help us to be more discerning, more spiritually mature.

Help us to develop a more biblical worldview. Help us to see everything and do everything through the lens of Scripture.

But Lord, we certainly need Your help with this. We struggle to grow. We often find ourselves stifled. But I pray that You would open the eyes of our hearts to a greater understanding.

I pray that we will all submit to the teachings of Your Word, to the teachings of our pastors, that we may grow, not just for the purpose of more knowledge and maturity, but because we get to grow into Christ.

We come to know You better. And what a sweet, sweet privilege that is, Lord. We thank You for it. We pray for the worship service that we are about to begin in a few minutes.

[40 : 33] Lord, we seek to honor You in our songs, in our prayers, and in our words. May You fill us with Your Spirit.

In Christ's name, Amen.