

APPLYING  
THE GOSPEL  
TO ALL OF YOUR LIFE

HOW TO



GROW

Small Group Guide

## How to Grow — Small Group Guide

---



# *How to Grow — Small Group Guide*

---

DARRYL DASH

Gospel for Life, Inc.  
Toronto

Ebook ISBN: 978-0-9952713-4-0  
Copyright © 2019 by Darryl Dash

Published by Gospel for Life Inc., Toronto

# Contents

Introduction	1
<b>PART I. SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION GUIDE</b>	
1. The Best News Ever and What It Means for You	5
2. We're Created to Grow	7
3. Rethinking Growth: Pursuing Joy and Transformed Desires	9
4. Know Where You Are, Then Take the Next Step	11
5. Master the Basics: Know, Worship, Obey	13
6. How Habits Help You Grow	15
7. Three Core Habits We Never Outgrow	17
8. Six Practices to Propel Your Spiritual Growth	19
9. Pursue Growth Together: Our Call to Disciple Others	21
<b>PART II. SAMPLE SERMONS</b>	
10. The Best News Ever (Romans 8:1-17)	25

<b>11.</b>	Created to Grow (2 Peter 1:3-11)	34
<b>12.</b>	The Essence of Growth (Matthew 22:34-40)	42
<b>13.</b>	Examine Yourself (2 Corinthians 13:1-10)	49
<b>14.</b>	Master the Basics (Ephesians 3:14-21)	56
<b>15.</b>	How Habits Help You Grow (Deuteronomy 6:4-12)	63
<b>16.</b>	Three Core Habits (Philippians 4:1-9)	70
<b>17.</b>	Practices to Propel Your Growth (Colossians 3:1-17)	77
<b>18.</b>	Consider and Imitate (Hebrews 13:7-8)	84

# Introduction

Thanks for your interest in using *How to Grow* in your small group.

I hope *How to Grow* is useful for individuals. I wanted someone to be able to pick it up in a bookstore and benefit from it. But the ideal use of *How to Grow* is in groups. As I say on page 91 of the book:

What we miss so often is that the Bible isn't written to solitary individuals but to the church. More often than not we could read "y'all" rather than "you." The Christian life doesn't make sense when lived alone. We were meant to live it in community with others...

An African proverb says, "If you want to go quickly, go alone. If you want to go far, go together." We can try to grow spiritually by ourselves, unencumbered by the quirks and demands of others. But if we want to go far in our growth, we must grow in community. Biblical community is one of God's most powerful tools for growth.

I'm so encouraged you're going to be using *How to Grow* with others.

Please make sure everyone in your group has a copy of the book, and encourage them to read each chapter before the meeting.

I've included a guide for each group meeting. A lot of the questions are found at the end of each chapter. I've modified them for group use and included some other tools.

While every small group is different, here's how I tend to structure the groups I run:

- Gather and small talk



- Icebreaker question
- Prayer
- Scripture Reading
- Brief comments on the passage
- Questions
- Concluding prayer
- Break into smaller groups for prayer
- Social time

The content of this guide follows that format. Feel free to modify it so it works best in your context.

I've also included sermons in the second section of the book. Use them, if you like, to get more ideas for your group.

You can also find more resources for church leaders at <https://gospelforlife.com/grow/leaders/>.

I'd love to hear from you. Please email me at [darryl@gospelforlife.com](mailto:darryl@gospelforlife.com) to let me know how it's going, or if there's anything I can do to help.

I pray God uses you, and his life-changing gospel, to help others grow!

Darryl Dash  
March 2019

**PART I**

---

**SMALL GROUP  
DISCUSSION GUIDE**



## CHAPTER 1

---

# *The Best News Ever and What It Means for You*

### ICEBREAKER QUESTION

---

When is a time in your life that you grew the most? What do you think contributed to that growth?

### PRAYER

---

### SCRIPTURE READING

---

Read Romans 8:1-17.

### BRIEF COMMENTS ON THE PASSAGE

---

We often think the gospel is the starting point to the Christian life, but it's more than that. As Tim Keller has said, the gospel is not the ABCs of the Christian life. It's the A to Z.

In Romans 8, Paul explains that through the gospel God frees us from condemnation (verses 1 to 4) and offers us a new way to

live (verses 8 and on). Today we're going to look at how the gospel changes how we live.

## QUESTIONS

---

1. How would you explain the gospel?
2. What truth about the gospel means the most to you?
3. Why do you think we often treat the gospel as old news rather than the best news ever?
4. This chapter outlines seven things that are true for those who have trusted Jesus. Which of the seven truths means the most to you right now? Which do you find hardest to believe?
5. What is one lesson from this chapter that you can apply to your life this week?

## CONCLUDING PRAYER

---

## PRAYER IN SMALLER GROUPS

---

## SOCIAL TIME

---

## CHAPTER 2

---

# *We're Created to Grow*

### ICEBREAKER QUESTION

---

What are some approaches to growth you've tried in the past that haven't worked?

### PRAYER

---

### SCRIPTURE READING

---

Read 2 Peter 1:3-11.

### BRIEF COMMENTS ON THE PASSAGE

---

This passage tells us that God has given us everything we need to grow (verses 3 and 4), but that we still have a role to play in our growth (verses 5 to 11). God wants us to grow!

Today we'll look at what Christian growth looks like, and how it's a much bigger deal than we usually realize.

## QUESTIONS

---

1. When is a time that you have experienced growth? What factors do you think led to that growth?
2. Why do you think that we sometimes believe that God is only interested in our spiritual lives?
3. In which area of your life—intellectual, physical, mental, relational, spiritual—do you want to grow most?
4. “Growth is the renewal of every part of our lives by God’s grace. It transforms us into God’s image, frees us from sin, and involves our habits and desires.” What do you think of this understanding of growth?
5. In what ways do you hope to grow in the coming months?
6. What’s one lesson you can apply from this chapter in your life this week?

## CONCLUDING PRAYER

---

## PRAYER IN SMALLER GROUPS

---

## SOCIAL TIME

---

## CHAPTER 3

---

# *Rethinking Growth: Pursuing Joy and Transformed Desires*

### ICEBREAKER QUESTION

---

Can you think of a time in your life when your relationship with God gave you a lot of joy? If so, what was it like?

### PRAYER

---

### SCRIPTURE READING

---

Read Matthew 22:34-40.

### BRIEF COMMENTS ON THE PASSAGE

---

Sometimes we make things pretty complicated. Today we're going to remind ourselves of the essence of Christianity. God doesn't just want our obedience; he wants our hearts. God also promises joy as we serve and follow him, even though life is sometimes very difficult.



## QUESTIONS

---

1. “Spiritual maturity isn’t about white-knuckling it to sainthood. It’s about becoming a person who is fully alive.” Is this different from the way you usually think about spiritual maturity?
2. Do you typically see joy and happiness as central to the Christian life? Why or why not?
3. God plans for us to live as restored humans in a restored earth. We’re meant to flourish as humans, not escape the earth or our humanity. How is this different from the way you think of the afterlife?
4. Why are we tempted to think God wants to take away rather than increase our joy?
5. How would things change if Christians and churches were known for their joy?
6. Why do you think that we sometimes see desire as a bad thing?
7. Why do you think God wants to change our desires, not just our knowledge or behavior?
8. What’s one lesson from this chapter that you can apply this week?

## CONCLUDING PRAYER

---

## PRAYER IN SMALLER GROUPS

---

## SOCIAL TIME

---

## CHAPTER 4

---

# *Know Where You Are, Then Take the Next Step*

### ICEBREAKER QUESTION

---

What is a time in your life that you were hopelessly lost and could have used a map or GPS to find your location?

### PRAYER

---

### SCRIPTURE READING

---

Read 2 Corinthians 13:1-10.

### BRIEF COMMENTS ON THE PASSAGE

---

This passage speaks to an important truth: we need to evaluate ourselves! Some of the Corinthians may have overestimated their spiritual condition, and so Paul writes in this passage to encourage them to take an honest look at themselves.

That's what we're going to be talking about today: how to

evaluate ourselves so we know how to take the next step in our growth.

## QUESTIONS

---

1. Is anyone willing to share what their current stage is?
2. Some people express surprise that they're farther ahead than they thought, or not as far as they may have guessed. Did anyone experience this?
3. What has worked well so far in your growth?
4. What steps should you be taking at your current stage?
5. Is there anything you have found especially helpful in your growth?
6. We can all play a role in helping others to grow. What can you do to encourage someone at an earlier stage?
7. What can you do to learn from someone who's ahead of you?
8. What's one lesson you can apply from this chapter in your life this week?

## CONCLUDING PRAYER

---

## PRAYER IN SMALLER GROUPS

---

## SOCIAL TIME

---

## CHAPTER 5

---

# *Master the Basics: Know, Worship, Obey*

### ICEBREAKER QUESTION

---

Do you tend to be someone who is abstract or concrete? Are you more of a thinker or a doer?

### PRAYER

---

### SCRIPTURE READING

---

Read Ephesians 3:14-21.

### BRIEF COMMENTS ON THE PASSAGE

---

It's interesting to study the prayers of the Bible. We usually pray for a change in circumstances. Paul here prays that we will know and love God more.

That's what we're going to talk about today: knowing, loving, and obeying God. It's important to do all three of these if we're going to grow.

## QUESTIONS

---

1. Which of the three basics — knowing, worship, and obeying — do you tend to gravitate towards? Which one do you tend to ignore?
2. Why do you think it's important to know more about God (theology) in order to grow?
3. One of the keys to change is to behold and worship God (2 Corinthians 3:18). Why is it important to behold God and treasure him in order to grow?
4. How does knowing God better and worshiping Him more help with obedience?
5. Many people tend to think that they can grow alone. Why do you think it's so important that we grow in community?
6. What's one lesson you can apply from this chapter in your life this week?

## CONCLUDING PRAYER

---

## PRAYER IN SMALLER GROUPS

---

## SOCIAL TIME

---

## CHAPTER 6

---

# *How Habits Help You Grow*

### ICEBREAKER QUESTION

---

What good habits have made the biggest difference in your life? And what bad habits have you found the most challenging?

### PRAYER

---

### SCRIPTURE READING

---

Read Deuteronomy 6:4-12.

### BRIEF COMMENTS ON THE PASSAGE

---

Surprisingly, the biggest barrier to growth isn't bad things. It's good things. In this passage, Moses warns Israel that they will likely forget God when life gets good. He teaches them to build habits so that they remember God in every part of life. Habits are important! That's what we're going to talk about today.

## QUESTIONS

---

1. Why do you think so many people have a hard time changing, even when the stakes are high?
2. This chapter argues that new knowledge, goals, and willpower aren't enough. Do you agree? Which of these approaches have you tried in your life?
3. Why are habits so important?
4. When have you successfully built a new habit in your life? What was the new habit? What can you learn from your experience?
5. Which of the seven best practices do you enjoy the most? Which do you find hardest?
6. What's one lesson from this chapter that you can apply this week?

## CONCLUDING PRAYER

---

## PRAYER IN SMALLER GROUPS

---

## SOCIAL TIME

---

## CHAPTER 7

---

# *Three Core Habits We Never Outgrow*

### ICEBREAKER QUESTION

---

When is a time when you experienced the best of Christian community — when God’s people really cared for you in a significant way?

### PRAYER

---

### SCRIPTURE READING

---

Read Philippians 4:1-9.

### BRIEF COMMENTS ON THE PASSAGE

---

We need habits in order to grow. But some habits matter more than others. Today’s passage reminds us of some key practices that are important for the Christian life. No matter how much we grow or how long we live, we need these habits!



## QUESTIONS

---

1. This chapter lists three core habits. Why do you think these habits matter more than others?
2. Which of the core habits do you practice already?
3. Which core habits do you enjoy the most? Which do you find the most challenging?
4. How can you build the habit of reading or listening to the Bible?
5. What steps can you take to build more spontaneous and planned prayer in your life?
6. What can you do to either find a good church or to encourage somebody in the church you are in?
7. What's one lesson from this chapter that you can apply this week?

## CONCLUDING PRAYER

---

## PRAYER IN SMALLER GROUPS

---

## SOCIAL TIME

---

## CHAPTER 8

---

# *Six Practices to Propel Your Spiritual Growth*

## **SIX PRACTICES TO PROPEL YOUR SPIRITUAL GROWTH**

---

### ICEBREAKER QUESTION

---

Do you have any unusual or surprising habits that you have found helpful in your life? Most of us do. Don't be afraid to share yours!

### PRAYER

---

### SCRIPTURE READING

---

Read Colossians 3:1-17.

### BRIEF COMMENTS ON THE PASSAGE

---

Today's passage gives us a big view of what God want to do in us, but then it gets particular about some practices we need to build

in our lives (verses 12 to 17). God has big plans for us, but these translate in Scripture to taking concrete actions.

## QUESTIONS

---

1. The book says we should focus on the core habits before moving on to these. Why is that important?
2. How can we avoid being overwhelmed as we build new habits?
3. Which of these habits excites you the most? Why?
4. Which of these habits scares you the most? Why?
5. Which habit will you focus on right now?
6. What's one lesson from this chapter that you can apply this week?

## CONCLUDING PRAYER

---

## PRAYER IN SMALLER GROUPS

---

## SOCIAL TIME

---

## CHAPTER 9

---

# *Pursue Growth Together: Our Call to Disciple Others*

### ICEBREAKER QUESTION

---

Think of someone that you look up to. What qualities make you admire them?

### PRAYER

---

### SCRIPTURE READING

---

Read 2 Timothy 2:1-7 and Hebrews 13:7-8.

### BRIEF COMMENTS ON THE PASSAGE

---

These passages reminds us that we learn best by imitating others. We don't realize it, but people are watching us, and we can have an influence on them that will last throughout eternity. God uses people to help others grow.

## QUESTIONS

---

1. Who are some people who have influenced your life? What can you learn from the way that they invested in you?
2. This chapter lists two lies that keep us from investing in others: thinking that we're not an influence, and thinking that we're not good enough. Which of these lies are you most tempted to believe?
3. Who are some reliable people who could use an investment of your time and encouragement, so that they can grow and influence others?
4. God uses the ordinary Christian life—involvement in a church community, Bible intake, prayer, relationships, and time—to change us. Why do you think we often underestimate this? How can you be more consistent in living this kind of life?
5. Why is it so important to learn by example? How can you invite people into your life so that they see what it looks like to follow Jesus?
6. How can you continue to apply the lessons of this book in your life?

## CONCLUDING PRAYER

---

## PRAYER IN SMALLER GROUPS

---

## SOCIAL TIME

---

**PART II**

---

# **SAMPLE SERMONS**



# *The Best News Ever (Romans 8:1-17)*

**Big Idea:** God offers us freedom from condemnation and a new way to live.

Thomas Johnson knew injustice. He was a slave, and slaves were commodities, publicly sold at auctions, often ripped apart from parents. Thomas had never known his father. He was often mistreated: tied to the whipping post and beaten with a three-pronged whip on his shoulders, lower back, and buttocks. He knew that shame.

He longed for freedom.

He longed for the place where boys could run and roam without fear, without struggle, without whippings. But as he lay within a hardened bed frame in the corner of a clapboard shack on a tobacco plantation in Virginia, he swore Heaven was a place to sing about, but never reach. For Thomas Johnson lived in the real world, one ruled by men like Quentin Ellis, who made sure freedom was enjoyed only by white men. (*Steal Away Home*)

Thomas was in a desperate situation.

Thomas was a slave. He was in bondage, caged, the property of another man. The master and foreman held absolute power over



him. He had no rights, no voice, no recourse, no future. The depth of this reality consumed him, and it was slowly suffocating what little hope he held.

After two decades of this, Thomas hardly felt human anymore. One night he decided, "I'm going to escape." It was an idea that had consumed his thoughts since childhood. Two things held him back: fear of getting caught, and not knowing what he would do once he was free.

But as he escaped, he came across something he didn't expect: a group of slaves worshipping Jesus.

He was captivated. Ezekiel, one of the slaves, turned to Thomas and spoke words that completely changed the direction of his life:

Jesus sets slaves like us free. He may not take away the chains from your hands and your feet. He may never let you off this plantation. But, Jesus will do something even better than that. He will take off the chains from your heart.

Jesus sets slaves free. He will take off the chains from your heart.

That's what we're going to look at today.

You see, according to the Bible, we're in slavery — not in the same kind of slavery as Thomas Johnson, but slavery nonetheless.

Jesus said, "Everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin" (John 8:34). Romans 6:20 says that all of us were "slaves to sin."

When Paul wrote these words to the church in Rome, it's estimated that one-third of the population were slaves. Many of those who were free had once been slaves.

The thing about being a slave back then is that you wouldn't have been able to tell who's a slave and who's not. And that's our condition today. The Bible says that the natural condition of every person alive is slavery to sin.

The main idea of being slaves to sin is that sin is our master. We like to think that we're self-determined, that we have the choice of how to live. The reality, according to God, is the opposite. We lack freedom. But the good news, according to Paul, is that we

have been set free from slavery to sin. So, the words that changed Thomas's life can change yours too:

Jesus sets slaves like us free. He may not take away the chains from your hands and your feet. He may never let you off this plantation. But, Jesus will do something even better than that. He will take off the chains from your heart.

We're a lot like like Thomas. And for slaves like us, the message of Romans 8 is very good news.

Today I want to answer one simple question: What does God offer us through the good news of what Jesus has done? And the answer comes in two parts. Here's the first.

#### FIRST: GOD OFFERS US FREEDOM FROM CONDEMNATION (ROMANS 8:1-4).

---

Romans 8:1 may be one of the most important verses in the Bible in what might be the greatest chapter of the Bible. Listen to these words and let them wash over you:

There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. (Romans 8:1)

Let the truth of that verse sink into the depths of your being.

No condemnation! Condemnation is a legal decision of guilt, along with the ensuing punishment attached. I didn't realize this until this week, but it also carries with it the idea of penal servitude.

One Bible scholar (F.F. Bruce) paraphrased it this way:

There is no reason why those who are in Christ Jesus should go on doing penal servitude as though they had never been pardoned and liberated from the prison house of sin.

According to the Bible, all of us are guilty before God. We have all sinned. We have all violated God's standards. It doesn't matter who

you are or how good you are. We've all been found guilty, and the punishment is death.

The good news, according to this verse? That although we're guilty, those who trust in Jesus are declared not guilty. They are free from condemnation — from the guilty verdict, from the punishment, and from the servitude that goes with sin. We're free!

Why are we free? Verses 2 to 4 tell us:

For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death. For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. (Romans 8:2-4)

God took the initiative to do what we couldn't. The law of sin and death is this: that all who sin must die. There was nothing we could do to escape this punishment. We deserved it. But then God found a way to rescue us. He sent his Son Jesus. And Jesus was given over to death as a sacrifice to take care of our sin problem. Because he was condemned in our place, there's no longer any condemnation for us.

If you're in Jesus, you're free. We no longer live under condemnation. Our sins — past, present, and future — have been dealt with by Jesus. We can live the rest of our lives in light of that freedom from condemnation.

So why is it so hard for us to feel like we're free from condemnation?

The New York Times featured a story about a 51-year-old ex-convict named Robert Salzman. After a horrific childhood, Salzman spent most of his adult life in prison. When he was released from prison in 2001, Salzman found it difficult to enjoy freedom outside prison walls, struggling to pay rent or doing stints in homeless shelters.

Finally, in June of 2010 Salzman had a grace-like experience.

While he was riding a New York City subway car, he was “found” by Rashaad Ernesto Green, a writer and director who was searching for someone to play a tough-looking former convict for an upcoming film. After an audition, Green surprised nearly everyone when he gave Salzman a key role for the film.

On one occasion, while filming with Green on location in a Long Island penitentiary, an exhausted Salzman fell asleep on a cot in the prison cell. When he woke up, he became confused and thought he was still a prisoner. Salzman started weeping in despair ... until it slowly dawned on him that he was now a free man. Salzman was overwhelmed by the joy of knowing that at any moment he could walk out of that cramped cell and through the prison doors. On the other side of the prison walls he could enjoy his new life of freedom.

As those who trust in Christ, regardless of our past, we can leave our slavery to sin and condemnation as we joyfully step into our freedom in Christ. “So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed” (John 8:36).

We need to be honest. We don’t always feel free. Honestly, some of us came in this morning feeling a weight of condemnation and shame. We feel like we never measure up, like we should be doing more. We feel like God is endlessly disappointed with us.

I want you to hear this: “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.” If you have followed Jesus, this is what is true of you.

If you are a Christian, then let this wash over you! You no longer have to dread any condemnation. You can step outside of the prison walls and enjoy your new life of freedom. No more guilt, no more shame. Jesus sets slaves free. He takes the chains from your heart. We will spend the rest of our lives living into that reality, trying to understand and grasp it. But it’s true, even when we don’t feel like it.

God offers us freedom from condemnation. But that’s not all.

## SECOND: GOD OFFERS US A NEW WAY TO LIVE (ROMANS 8:5-17).

---

I used to think that Christian life is about verse 1: that we're no longer under condemnation. I then figured it was up to us to figure out how to not mess it up from there. It's a little like being released from prison and then being told, "Good luck. I hope you can figure things out from here!"

But that's not what happens at all. God doesn't just free us from condemnation. He gives us everything we need to live from that point on.

That's what verses 5 to 17 are about. Paul says that God has not just changed us from guilty to not guilty, but he's given us everything we need to grow.

Not only have we been delivered from sin's penalty, but we've also been delivered from sin's power.

Let's just look at a few of the things that God gives us after he sets us free.

### God gives us a new mindset (Romans 8:5-8).

---

A lot of people talk about the importance of mindset these days. The right mindset makes all the difference. Paul would agree. The only problem: apart from God, we're limited to what calls our flesh, our human nature with all of its limitations and sinfulness. But then God comes along and gives us a completely new mindset, the mind of the Holy Spirit.

For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. For to set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. (Romans 8:5-6)

When you follow Jesus, he gives you a new mindset. All of a sudden

you begin to think differently, and to set your mind on the things that the Holy Spirit cares about. I was just reading a book about someone who committed her life to Christ in the middle of the night, and the very next day she found that the way she handled temptations had completely changed. She still struggled, but her mindset had changed forever.

God gives us a new mindset. As Paul says, this new mindset brings us life and peace.

### **God gives us assurance of our future (Romans 8:9-11).**

---

I talked to someone this week who was imagining all the worst-case scenarios about the future. I've been there. It's easy to imagine all the things that can go wrong, especially when we feel like the future is in our hands.

But Paul gives us great news in verses 9 to 11. He says that the Spirit now dwells within you. Think about that for a moment. That's pretty mind blowing. Paul describes the end result in verse 11:

If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who dwells in you. (Romans 8:11)

Here's the truth about you. You will continue to struggle in this life. That's why it often feels like we're still under condemnation. And one day you will die. But God promises that even then he won't be done with you. He will raise your body just as he did Jesus'. And one day you will be fully and finally alive and free. Your future couldn't be more secure.

But that's not all.

### **God has made us his children (8:14-17).**

---

Here's the great news. We're now children of God. And as his

children, two things are true. First: we have a new relationship with God. Second: we are now heirs.

For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, "Abba! Father!" The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him. (Romans 8:14-17)

This is one of the greatest truths about the Christian life: God has adopted us. One scholar (F.F. Bruce) writes:

F. F. Bruce says:

The term "adoption" may smack somewhat of artificiality in our ears; but in the first century A.D. an adopted son was a son deliberately chosen by his adoptive father to perpetuate his name and inherit his estate; he was no whit inferior in status to a son born in the ordinary course of nature and might well enjoy the father's affection more fully and reproduce the father's character more worthily

If you are a follower of Christ, it's because God has deliberately chosen you. He has given you his name, and he's promised that you will inherit his estate. God cares about you so much that he's brought you into his family.

In other words, God offers us both freedom from condemnation *and* a new way to live.

In the coming weeks, we're going to talk about how to grow. But today we have the foundation for growth. Everything we're going to talk about builds on this.

I began by telling you about Thomas, who heard these words:

Jesus sets slaves like us free. He may not take away the chains from your hands and your feet. He may never let you off this plantation. But, Jesus will do something even better than that. He will take off the chains from your heart.

Thomas heard these words, and something happened.

A flood of relief gently pushed years of anguish and grief from his young heart. His eyes released a flood of joyful tears, as Thomas felt like he was sitting right next to this man—Jesus—the One who could finally set him free from the bondage that held his heart. There in Ezekiel's shack, in the middle of the darkened slave quarters, surrounded by the gentle whisper-songs, beneath a clouded night sky—Thomas believed.

That's what happened to Thomas. And everyone who comes to Jesus can experience the same truth. Jesus sets slaves like us free. Jesus will take off the chains from your heart.



## CHAPTER 11

---

# *Created to Grow (2 Peter 1:3-11)*

**Big Idea:** We grow by relying on what God has given us, and then taking steps to grow.

It's the classic question: How can I get from here to there?

For instance:

- How can I get from couch potato to the best shape of my life?
- How do I get from broke student with no job to the corner suite?
- How do we get from an idea — say, a dream vacation to Hawaii — to actually sitting on Waikiki Beach?

I don't think there's a person here who is satisfied with life as it is right now. We all want to go from where we are right now to some desired state in the future. We want better health, relationships, and to be closer to God.

The real question: **How do we get from where we are right now to where God wants us to be?**

### **Why This Is Important**

---

That's the question I want to ask today. Let's face it: a lot of us are

in the before side of the equation and don't know how to move forward.

Oh sure. We know the theory. Is there anyone who doesn't know that the secret to getting in shape is to eat better and to work out more? Or that the secret to taking that dream vacation is to plan it out, and then to spend less and save some of our money for our trip?

**The problem isn't that we lack knowledge. The problem is that we seem to lack the power to do what we need to do.** We want to grow, and we need more than just steps. We need help so that we can actually do what we know we should be doing.

And that's where today's passage is going to help us.

**The passage we just read answers the question: How do we grow?** I'm not just talking about how to grow spiritually. I'm talking about how to grow in every area of our lives, because God cares about every part of your life. God cares about your soul, and he also cares about your emotions, your relationships, your work life, your family, and your physical health. God cares about it all. God doesn't just want part of your life. He wants all of it.

So there's the question: **How do we grow in every part of our lives?**

Peter answers that question. And I'm so grateful for how he answers, because he doesn't just give us a list of things to do. Peter's answers provide clear, practical advice *and* the power we need to do what we know we should.

**How do we grow in every part of our lives? Two answers.**

## GOD GIVES US EVERYTHING WE NEED TO GROW (1:3-4).

---

I'm so glad that Peter doesn't begin with something that we need to do. Instead, Peter begins with what God has already done for us.

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, so 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. (2 Peter 1:3-4)

Peter was a close friend and follower of Jesus. He was an eyewitness of Jesus' life and ministry. Now, near the end of his life, he writes to Christian friends to remind them of some truths that they are likely to forget.

And without fanfare, he launches into one of the most important truths that we need to know: God gives us everything we need to grow. Peter makes it clear: the foundation for our growth is God's power and grace. God gives us everything we need to grow.

Let's break this down a little.

- **“His divine power”** — What kind of power gives us what we need? I'm always running into people who run out of power. “I called you. Why didn't you pick up your phone?” “My battery ran out.” Or, we experience what's become the story of my life. We set out to accomplish a whole bunch of things, but before we can get through the list we find ourselves depleted, and we have to save the rest of what we had planned for another day. That's not what Peter is talking about. He's not talking about our puny power. Peter says that we have a limitless power supply available to us. We have access to God's own power, a power that never runs out. God never gets tired. His power never gets depleted. God's limitless power is available to help us grow.
- **“has granted to us”** — How do we get this power? Well, it's like when a student fills out an application for student aid. If they qualify, they're given a grant. They don't earn it. They never have to repay it. It's simply given to them free of charge. That's exactly how we get God's power. We don't deserve it. We don't earn it. God simply grants it to us. Our only qualification is need.
- **“all things”** — This is pretty cool. How much of what we need does God give us? Does God say, “I'll give you 80%, but then the

rest of it is up to you?" No. Peter says that God gives us all things. God doesn't hold back. There is nothing we need that God doesn't give to us. He gives us absolutely everything we need.

- **"that pertain to life and godliness"** — I love how comprehensive this is. There is nothing in your life that this does not cover. God gives us everything we need for every part of our earthly lives, and he also gives us everything we need to grow in our love for him and our holiness. He offers transformation in every part of your life right now, and hope for the age to come. God doesn't just help us to grow spiritually. He helps us to grow in every part of our lives.

God gives us everything we need to grow in every part of our lives. We don't have to earn it. It's available to all of us. We don't need to rely on our power; we need to rely on God's power, because it will give you everything that you need.

**How do we all of this?** Peter tells us in verse 3: "through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence." How do we get what we need to grow? By knowing God.

What were we made for? To know God. What aim should we set ourselves in life? To know God. What is the eternal life that Jesus gives? Knowledge of God. "This is life eternal, that they may know thee, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent" (John 17:3). What is the best thing in life, bringing more joy, delight, and contentment than anything else? Knowledge of God. "Thus saith the Lord, Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom, neither let not the mighty man glory in his might, let not the rich man glory in his riches; but let him that glorieth glory in this, that he understandeth and knoweth me" (Jeremiah 9:23). What, of all the states God ever sees man in, gives him most pleasure? Knowledge of himself. "I desire ... the knowledge of God more than burnt offerings," says God (Hosea 6:6)... Once you have become aware that the main business that you are here for is to know God, most of life's problems fall into place of their own accord. (J.I. Packer, *Knowing God*)

Here's what you need to know about learning how to grow.

**You don't grow by trying to grow. You grow by getting to know God.**

If you try to grow on your own, you will be stuck trying to grow on your own power. The problem with your power is that it's limited. You won't get very far before you run out.

When you focus instead on knowing God — on making him the priority of your life, making sure you're in relationship with him, relying on him, and getting to know him better — then he will unleash his power in your life, and you will grow.

We don't need to rely on our own power to grow. That never works in the long run. The key to growth is knowing God. When he knows him, he gives us everything we need to grow.

**Which is why I need to ask you: Do you know God?** I don't assume that, just because you're here today, that you know him. You can go to church for years and not really know him.

Here's what I want to ask. Are you in relationship with him? Have you thrown yourself on what Jesus has done for you in giving his life for your sins? Do you daily depend on him? Would you say that you know Jesus — not just *about* him, but that you really know him like you know a friend? Are you growing in your knowledge of him by reading what he's revealed, and spending time with him?

Make sure that you do. You were made to know God and to live in relationship with him. Don't leave today without knowing God and trusting in what Jesus has done. Knowing God is the most important thing you could do with your life. Come to him today. Ask him to receive you. He will welcome you. He will invite you into the lifelong adventure of knowing him.

How do we grow? **God gives us everything we need, so we don't have to rely on ourselves.**

But that's not all. Peter gives us another answer to how we can grow.

## WE CAN TAKE SMALL STEPS TO GROW (1:5-11).

---

What I've just said is so important. If you don't know God, if you don't rely on everything that he gives us, then you will never grow like he wants you to. God gives us everything we need, so we don't have to rely on ourselves.

But that doesn't mean we're passive.

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. (2 Peter 1:5-7)

**Peter gives us a series of steps that we need to take if we're going to grow.** It's going to take effort, Peter says, but with God's help we can take these steps.

What are they?

Peter says we're to supplement our faith. What he means is this: **If we really are depending on God's power to give us everything we need, then this must work itself out in some very practical ways.** We must rely on God's resources if we're going to grow. And when we rely on these resources, we'll take some steps to grow.

Peter lists some of those steps here. He lists them like a chain. It's really a sketch of the character God produces in us as we grow. He lists eight virtues that will be true of us as we grow:

- Faith — trusting God, which is where it all begins; this is where all the other virtues come from
- Virtue — moral excellence, which means that we change from the inside out
- Knowledge — growth in our knowledge of God
- Self-control — the ability to restrain ourselves from sinful desires

- Steadfastness — to stay faithful not just for a short time, but over the long haul
- Godliness — living a godly life
- Brotherly affection — which ties in closely to the last virtue
- Love — the virtue that sums up all other virtues

Peter tells us to take steps to add these to our lives. “Make every effort...” But we don’t need to be overwhelmed. We need to keep deepening our knowledge of God, and then with the resources he gives, we can gradually grow these virtues in our lives.

I love how Peter concludes:

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. For in this way there will be richly provided for you an entrance into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. (2 Peter 1:8-11)

These qualities are essential. Without them, we can’t really say that we belong to Jesus. But they’re gradual. Peter mentions that they can be ours *and* increasing. We don’t need to be perfect. We just need to stay close to Jesus, and then to make every effort to add these virtues to our lives.

I love this tension. How do we grow? We don’t grow on our own. That could never work! We grow by relying on the resources that God makes available to us. But then we make every effort to add virtue to our lives, to take small steps to grow.

How do we grow? By relying on Jesus, or by working hard? Yes. Both. **We grow by relying on what God has given us, and then taking steps to grow.**

So let’s revisit the question we started with. **How do we get from**

**here to there?** How do we get from our current state — whatever that is — to become the people that God wants us to be?

There are two answers:

1. **God gives us everything we need — so we don't have to rely on ourselves.**
2. **We can take small steps to grow — so we don't need to feel overwhelmed.**

Some people think we grow simply by relying on God. Others think we grow by trying harder. Peter says we need both. Both go really So how do we grow? **We grow by relying on what God has given us, and then taking steps to grow.**

Do you want to grow? I believe you do.

**Don't try to grow on your own power.** It will never work. Rely on what God has given us. He's given us everything we need for life and godliness. He has an infinite supply of what you need to grow. Throw yourself today on Jesus who promises to give you everything that you need.

**Based on that power, take steps to grow.** Make every effort. Work at things like becoming godly, knowing God more, and loving others. Use the resources that God provides to make changes in your life. It will be a gradual process, but remember that you're not alone. He will give you everything that you need.

The result, according to Peter: they will keep you from being ineffective or unfruitful in the knowledge of God, and you will never fail, and "there will be richly provided for you an entrance into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ."



## *The Essence of Growth (Matthew 22:34-40)*

**Big Idea:** The essence of growth is loving God and others.

Do you ever struggle when you face one of these — a EULA?

I know you've come across them: End User License Agreements. They are those contracts that you have to sign when you use a new piece of software. They are multiple pages, contain all kinds of legalese, and are a barrier to actually using the software.

The worst part about them is that we don't know what we're signing. Nobody really reads them, so for all I know we're agreeing to give them my firstborn child or pay them hundreds of dollars a month.

You may have wondered contracts are legally enforceable. After all, most of us just scroll through them and click "I agree." I was shocked to discover that they actually are. This is concerning, because they can contain statements like the following:

- Do not criticize this product publicly.
- Using this product means you will be monitored.
- By signing this contract, you also agree to every change in future versions of the contract, which are subject to change without

notice.

- We are not responsible if this product messes up your computer.

We're taking a big risk when you agree to these terms. They seem to make these agreements so hard to read that we're not making an informed decision, and we could be agreeing to things that aren't in our best interests. We're taking a chance that things will work out and putting blind trust in some corporation.

But here's the thing: sometimes feels like we're signing a EULA with God. God expects certain things from us. What exactly are we agreeing to when it comes to following God?

## TWO ISSUES

---

This is why one day a man posed a serious question to Jesus.

But when the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together. And one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. "Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?" (Matthew 22:34-36)

We're at a climatic point in Jesus' life. The opposition to Jesus is rising, and his enemies are trying to trap Jesus. And then a man comes and asks Jesus a question — not just any man, but a lawyer, an expert in God's law.

And the question is a simple but profound one: which is the greatest commandment in the Law?

We can learn a lot from this interaction. When it comes to following Jesus, there are two issues: a head issue and a heart issue.

### A Head Issue

---

The question this guy asks is actually a good one.

He's an expert in the law. He knows God's law inside and out. And he's wrestling with a question that seems to have been a live one for those in his field in that day.

About twenty years before Jesus, the story is told of a Gentile convert to Judaism who approached Rabbi Hillel and asked him to summarize the whole Law while he stood on one leg — in other words, quickly. Before and after Jesus' time, other rabbis posed answers to this question. A little later than this, rabbinic tradition counted and categorized the commands of the Old Testament into 613: 248 positive and 365 prohibitive. Scholars loved to debate how to rank and summarize them.

And so, at one level, this is a fair question. What's the essence of what it means to follow God?

Let's put it a different way. This is my Bible. It has three-quarter of a million words. I'm a pretty fast reader, but it would take over 70 hours from cover to cover. There are so stories, different styles of literature, and things that I don't understand.

One of the pastors I respect a lot, someone who knows more about the Bible than I ever will, wrote:

Suggestion: Since the Bible is probably too big a book for us to master it all in one lifetime, in addition to many annual read-throughs, choose one OT book and one NT and spend the rest of your life drilling down really deep there. Mine: Isaiah, Romans. Both are addictive.

And if I had two lifetimes: Ecclesiastes, John. Oh, if only!

Even the top scholars only get to master a small slice of what's in here!

And there are so many things in here that contradict the way that we think. So it's not a bad question to ask: what's this book all about? If you could summarize this in only a few words, what is the message of Scripture? That's the head issue.

## The Heart Issue

---

But if we're honest, we're not just dealing with a head issue when it comes to the Bible. We're dealing with a heart issue too. We read, "one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to *test* him..." This man isn't asking a completely innocent question. He's putting Jesus to the test, trying to see if he can trip Jesus up.

It's important to know this! If we're dealing with head issues, then we need more information. But when we're dealing with heart issues, we don't need more information. We need a change of heart.

There was an old college pastor who knew this. Students would come home. He'd ask them about how they were doing. They'd often hem and haw, talking about the difficulties and doubts now that they'd taken a little philosophy, or maybe a science class or two, and how it all started to shake the foundations.

He'd look at them and say, "So who have you been sleeping with?" Shocked, their faces would inevitably fall and say something along the lines of, "How did you know?"

It's a crude and direct question, but this college pastor knew that they weren't really facing head issues. They were facing heart issues. Their problem with God wasn't that they didn't understand; it's that they didn't want to listen. We're experts at dismissing what God says when we've made up our minds about what we want.

If we're honest, we're like this too. Our problems with Jesus are both head and heart ones.

## THE ESSENCE OF FOLLOWING JESUS (22:36-40)

---

And so today, Jesus is going to do us a great favor. He's going to deal with both our head and our heart issues by telling us the essence of what it means to follow God.

The reason we're looking at this today is because we're looking at what it means to grow. It's easy to get confused: to think that

spiritual growth is about all kinds of things that don't really matter. I used to think that spiritual growth meant becoming this serious, other-worldly person. I had a distorted view of what it meant to follow God, and I wasn't sure I liked it.

In his passage Jesus clears away all our confusion and answers both our head and heart issues with the essence of what it means to follow God:

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. (Matthew 22:37-40)

What does it mean to follow God? What is the Bible all about? Two things: Loving God with our whole beings. Jesus quotes Deuteronomy 6:5, which was part of the Shema, words that were repeated by Jews twice a day:

Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. (Deuteronomy 6:4-5)

He's not just talking about an emotion. He's talking about giving ourselves to God with our entire beings.

What's the essence of what God wants from you? Love. It's the summary of the entire law, all the commands of Scripture. Jesus blows away our categories, whether you're religious or not religious, because what God is looking for is different from religious duty and irreligious freedom. Jesus redefines both the content (what God's really after) and the motive of the law (why it's important). In other words, Jesus deals with both our content and heart issues with one word: *love*. The answer to both our head and our heart issues is love.

And then Jesus adds a second element: loving our neighbor as ourselves. He quotes from Leviticus 19:18:

You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against the sons of your own people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD.

Love: not just a feeling, but giving ourselves to other imperfect people to help them live as God intends for them to live.

Why did the Early Church succeed where we are failing? How did they transform the Western world in such a relatively short time? They did it because they did things that baffled the Romans. The Early Church didn't picket, they didn't boycott, and they didn't gripe about what was going on in their culture. They just did things that astonished the Romans. They took in their abandoned babies. They helped their sick and wounded. They restored dignity to the slaves. They were willing to die for what they believed. After a while, their actions so softened the hearts of the Romans that they wanted to know more about who these Christians were and who was the God they represented.

Without confrontation, protest, or debate, love did its work. (The Way Back: How Christians Blew Our Credibility and How We Get It Back)

## OUR RESPONSE

---

Today, Jesus cuts through all the clutter in our minds and hearts and gets to the heart of what he's looking for. **The essence of growth is love for God and others.**

And so for those of you who have intellectual questions, Jesus summarizes what all of Scripture is about. It's about love for God and others. It's about giving ourselves to God with our complete beings, and then loving others too. That's what growth is all about. It's what God wants from you. That's the essence of Christianity: God bringing us back into relationship with him so we can love him fully and love others too.

For those of you with heart issues, who aren't sure that you're ready to follow Jesus, and who would rather ask questions than to sign on, Jesus has the same answer for you: love. He made you

for this. You may be running, but understand what you're running away from: love.

We're a lot like the expert in the law in this story. We wonder what following God is all about. We wonder what God wants from us. We wonder what it means to grow.

Jesus gives us a simple answer: love. And because he knows that we're incapable of loving God and loving others by ourselves, he gives us an even greater answer. He doesn't just ask us for love, but he gives us his love. He loves us with all of his being, giving himself for us at the cross to forgive our sins and change our hearts. "God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8).

God doesn't want your religiosity. He wants your love. And God understands your reluctance to trust him, and he answers with the same word: love. It's what he expects from you, and it's what he's given to you. The only question left is this: how will you respond?

# *Examine Yourself (2 Corinthians 13:1-10)*

**Big Idea:** Test yourself to know where you stand spiritually.

Char and I used to participate in a fitness program. It would come with lessons, habits, and exercises. It changed our lives for the better in many ways. Char lost a lot of weight, and both of us improved our eating and other habits.

But Saturdays were hard. Every Saturday we'd pull out a tape measure and measure our progress. This is where it got real. Had we built muscle and made progress, or not? Some Saturdays we had to take pictures as well, so we'd be able to see our progress from the beginning to the end of the program.

I have to tell you that there's something in me that resists measurement. Measurement brings accountability. Every Saturday I had to face the reality of where I was compared to where I wanted to be.

It's the same in every area of our lives. We need to accurately assess our progress. It's even true in our spiritual lives as well.

At least that's the message of 2 Corinthians 13:5: "Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves."

Paul, the apostle who planted this church, is writing to a church he had planted. He's writing to address some problems in the



church. In particular, he's addressing some of the criticisms that have been leveled at him as a leader. Not everyone was a fan. By the time that he writes this letter, most of the church has repented, but not everyone. He writes this church because he cares about them deeply, and because he wants to encourage them, as well as to lead the minority to change their view of his leadership.

In other words, this is an ordinary church. They have problems. They have all kinds of people at all different stages. And as we get to the end of the letter, Paul tells them to evaluate where they are.

For the next few minutes, I want to walk with you through this passage to see what we can learn about how to assess and evaluate our own growth, and why this matters. From this passage I think we learn three lessons. Here's the first one.

### EXAMINE YOURSELF. (13:5-6)

---

Paul says in verses 5-6:

Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves. Or do you not realize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you?—unless indeed you fail to meet the test! I hope you will find out that we have not failed the test.

"Examine yourselves." Examine means to put yourself to the test. If you were here last week, it's the same word that Matthew used in the passage we looked at last week: "And one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to *test* him" (Matthew 22:35). Paul then repeats himself: "Test yourselves." In particular, he wants them to test whether they are genuinely followers of Jesus or not.

Why would Paul do this? What led Paul to instruct them to test themselves?

Paul was concerned by some of the behavior he saw in the Corinthian church. If you read 1 and 2 Corinthians, you will realize that there were some problems within the church that needed to be addressed. Some within the church had flirted with false

teachers. They were influenced by society's views of leadership. The church had sometimes tolerated immorality. It was a church that had been marred sometimes by conflict and division.

The surprising thing is that some within the church had demanded proof of Paul's ministry and message. They examined Paul and judged him as deficient. Paul turns the tables on them and suggest that they need to examine themselves.

The reality is that we're not always good judges of ourselves. We are so quick to judge others quickly and not even realize that we ourselves could be in trouble. If we are following Jesus, then that faith in him should translate into obedience. If our lives don't line up with what we profess to believe, then we need to think about what this could mean.

Paul says that it's possible for someone to think they're a Christian when they're really not. One of my heroes, Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, was a leading doctor in England before he became a pastor. He said this:

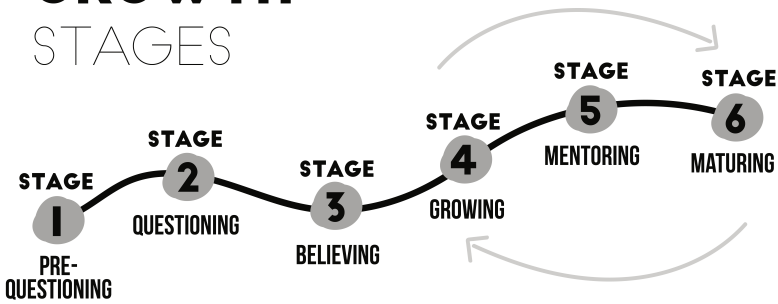
For many years I thought I was a Christian when in fact I was not. It was only later that I came to see that I had never been a Christian and became one. . . .What I needed was preaching that would convict me of sin. . . .But I never heard this. The preaching we had was always based on the assumption that we were all Christians.

What's interesting is that I seem to remember the same thing about his wife. She too believed she was a Christian until one day, as she listened to her husband preach, she realized that she was not.

This is why we need to examine ourselves. We need to take an honest look at our lives to see where we stand in relationship to Jesus.

We're all at different stages, as you can see on the image on the screen:

# GROWTH STAGES



It's important that we know what stage we're at, so we have an accurate assessment of our current stage and what we can do to advance in our growth.

It's one reason why we've developed an online assessment that you can take. I hope you take it. You can also take a look at chapter 4 of *How to Grow*, which will give you some idea of your current stage and what you can do to move to the next stage.

Remember:

Each stage is beautiful. Each stage builds on what's come before, and is a prelude to what's coming next...There's hope for each stage. We can celebrate our progress, help those who are behind us and with us, learn from those who are ahead of us, and take the next step. As long as we're alive, God invites us to grow and to take the next step. (*How to Grow*)

Examine yourself. Test yourself. It's very easy to be self-deceived about our spiritual condition, so it's important to do this. We don't want to be self-deceived about where we stand. It's much better to know where we are so we know what we need to do in order to grow.

That's the first lesson we learn from the passage. Here's the second.

## LEADERS EXIST TO HELP YOU KNOW WHERE YOU STAND, AND TO HELP YOU TO GROW. (13:7-10)

---

In verses 9 to 10, Paul explains why he wrote this letter to the church in Corinth:

For we cannot do anything against the truth, but only for the truth. For we are glad when we are weak and you are strong. Your restoration is what we pray for. For this reason I write these things while I am away from you, that when I come I may not have to be severe in my use of the authority that the Lord has given me for building up and not for tearing down. (2 Corinthians 13:8-10)

We learn at least three things about spiritual leadership from this passage.

**First: leaders care more about serving than they do about their rights.** Paul was under attack by some within the church, but you see his real goal here. He doesn't care if he's weak and they're strong. He's not in leadership for his own good. He's got a much bigger concern.

This reminds us of one of the most important things about leadership, especially within the church. Spiritual leaders do not exist within the church to serve themselves. They exist to serve God and to serve you. Simon Sinek puts it best: "Leaders would sooner sacrifice what is theirs to save what is ours. And they would never sacrifice what is ours to save what is theirs. This is what it means to be a leader." Paul is ready to sacrifice what's his to serve the Corinthians.

**Second: spiritual leaders want to help you grow.** Paul gives his real agenda: their restoration. "Your restoration is what we pray for." Paul is more interested in their restoration than his own wellbeing. He wants them put in order and to make progress. He wants them to grow.

One of my roles as a pastor — one of my most important roles — is to help you grow. One of the most shocking verses in the Bible is Hebrews 13:17:

Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account.

Okay, I know the shocking part for you: that the church is told to obey its leaders. That seems like crazy talk. A lot of us think that the last person we had to obey was our parents back in Grade 5. Ever since then we've made it a point that we're not going to obey anyone. We're naturally distrustful of leadership, and this verse points out of one of our potential blindspots. If we have spiritual leaders who are acting as the Bible instructs, putting our wellbeing ahead of their own, then it's both honoring to God and helpful if we obey them.

But that's not even the shocking part. The shocking part for me is the second part: "as those who will have to give account." This is shocking. We tend to think that we're only accountable for ourselves. Here we learn that your leaders are accountable for you. I will give account to God not just for my life but for how I've cared for your souls.

**But there's one more thing we learn: that spiritual leaders combine love and authority in their care for you.** In verse 10, Paul mentions that he has authority. When necessary, that authority may seem unpleasant or harsh. But that's not his intention. Paul goes out of his way to express his authority in a way that builds up rather than tears down.

Let's put this together. Test yourself to know where you stand spiritually. But you're not alone. God has given you the church to help. In particular, God has given you leaders — pastors and elders — who have a special responsibility to help you grow.

This is why I'd like to ask you to pray that God would raise up elders in our church.

So: assess your own growth, and use your leaders to help you. There's one more lesson we learn as we close.

## YOUR SPIRITUAL CONDITION MATTERS! (13:1-4)

---

Why does all of this matter? Why should you know your current stage? Why should you or anyone else care whether you're growing or not? Paul says in verses 3 and 4 about Jesus:

He is not weak in dealing with you, but is powerful among you. For he was crucified in weakness, but lives by the power of God. For we also are weak in him, but in dealing with you we will live with him by the power of God. (2 Corinthians 13:3-4)

What's he saying? Whether or not your leaders are present or not, whether or not your leaders are good or not, Jesus is both present and he is powerful. Your spiritual condition is of utmost importance to him. They may have thought that Jesus was weak, just like they thought that Paul was weak, but never mistake Jesus' willingness to die for you as a sign of weakness. See it as a sign of his love and power. Jesus died to make your growth possible. He offers forgiveness to anyone who wants it. But he didn't just die for you. He died so you could live as a new person. He is very concerned with your growth.

And so Paul says: Test yourself to know where you stand spiritually. On those Saturday mornings we would get out the measuring tape and measure our progress. I'm asking you to get out the measuring tape today and measure your progress. We're here to help. Because your spiritual condition really matters.

## Master the Basics (Ephesians 3:14-21)

**Big Idea:** Pray to grow in every dimension of your faith.

When you talk to folks about Christianity, a lot of people will say, “I’m a Christian.” When you press them, they mean, “I believe in Christ. I believe in the truths of Christianity, basically.” But when you ask them how this translates into their experience, they’ll say, “I’m kind of stuck there. It hasn’t really changed my life.”

We’re in a series on how to grow. In the past few weeks we’ve prepared ourselves by looking at the gospel, the basics of what Christianity is all about, and what stage you’re at right now.

But today we’re going to get to the real power of Christianity. It’s not just about believing something in an abstract way. To become a Christian means that you *experience* something; that it changes every area of your life.

Being a Christian is more than about just believing a set of facts. It’s more than about attending church or being a moral person. In this passage we see what it’s all about. And that’s what we’re going to see in this prayer.

This is an unusual prayer in a lot of ways. Paul, the writer, doesn’t pray for anything about the circumstances of the people that he’s praying about. There’s nothing wrong with praying about

circumstances, of course, but Paul teaches us that there's something even bigger. Most of us think that if our circumstances changed, then we would change. But Paul knows that circumstances don't make us who we are. If Paul's prayer is answered for us, then we can truly change, even if the world around us stays completely the same.

This prayer is also unusual in that it's both theological and practical. Most of us have developed a healthy fear of theologians. It's not completely our fault. We've heard enough pastors and professors talk about theology to know that theological talk can be a good cure for insomnia. We can almost feel our eyes glazing over. But Paul knows that there's nothing more practical than good theology. So we're going to pray a prayer that's steeped in theology, and yet is all about real change, change that will affect us in the deepest parts of our lives.

One last thing that's unusual about this prayer before we jump in. This is also an emotional prayer. Paul says in verse 14: "For this reason I kneel before the Father..." It's not unusual to see someone bow to pray. Some churches even have kneelers right in their pews. But when Paul wrote this, people generally didn't kneel to pray. The normal posture for prayer in that day was standing. Why did Paul kneel, then? Probably because this prayer carried some emotion. This isn't just a cold, intellectual prayer. There's some emotion behind what Paul's going to pray.

So what does Paul teach us to pray?

### PRAY THAT GOD STRENGTHENS YOU WITH POWER (3:16-17A).

---

Pray that God will give us power so that we're changed within.

Not just power in general, but power toward a specific purpose: power that we would be changed in the depths of our beings. Read verses 16 and 17:



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... (Ephesians 3:16-17)

What's Paul praying for? Paul's praying that something will happen in what he calls "your inner being." This is the inner part of you that no-one can see, the part that makes you who you are. Paul's praying for the very essence of who we are, at the very center of our personalities.

And what does Paul pray for our inner beings? He prays that we'll be strengthened with power through the Spirit. The purpose of this prayer is that "Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith." He doesn't pray that we'll have a power that will improve our standing with others or get us more of what we want. The power Paul prays for is that the inner parts of us will become places where Christ can make his home.

There are two words that Paul could have used when he said dwell in verse 17. One means to inhabit a place as a guest, kind of like you stay in a hotel room. You may not even unpack your suitcase. You certainly don't strip off the wallpaper if you don't like it and make plans to remodel the place. You're only there for a few days. But that's not the word that Paul used when he said dwell. It's a strong word that means taking up permanent residence, to really settle down. Paul's praying that our inner beings will be strengthened so that Christ may really settle down and live there. And if Christ lives at the very center of our beings, it's going to mean transformation. We'll never be the same.

We have to ask a question here. We know that Christ already dwells within believers. So why would Paul pray for something to happen that's already happened? D.A. Carson says that it's like a couple that scrimps enough money together to put a down-payment on a home. They buy the house, but they know that it needs a ton of work. The wallpaper needs to come off, the carpet is disgusting, the basement is full of junk from the previous owner,

and the kitchen was designed by a man. The roof leaks and the insulation barely meets the minimum standards. The electrical service is 60 amps, the furnace is about to die, and a lot of the appliances are olive green. Other than that, it's a really nice house.

Before the couple moves in, they rip up carpet and clean up. Over the years they tackle the repairs. They remodel the kitchen, fix the leaks, and buy a new furnace and air conditioner. They redecorate and even add an extension at the back of the house. They landscape around the house.

After living there for twenty-five years, the husband turns to his wife one day and says, "You know, I really like it here. This place suits us. This house really feels like home to me."

That's exactly what Paul is talking about. When Christ takes us residence within us, he finds the equivalent of piles of junk, dated wallpaper, olive green appliances, and a leaking roof. He moves in, but it's not at all appropriate for him. But he moves in to our inner beings, and as he does he begins cleaning, repairing, and expanding. Over time, our inner being dwelling places that reflect who lives there. Our inner beings become dwelling places that reflect his character.

It's so important that we see how this happens. It's not the result of some self-improvement program. Paul prays in verse 16 that it's "according to the riches of his glory" and "through his Spirit." It doesn't totally cut us out of the picture, because it also says "through faith." But make no mistake: this is something that God does. It's based on the glorious riches of Jesus Christ secured by him at Calvary. What Jesus did for us at the cross is more than enough not only to save us, but to change us in our innermost beings. The power comes not from us, but from the glorious riches of Jesus Christ that are applied to us through the Spirit.

So this is the first part of Paul's prayer. It's not just that we believe certain things. This prayer is about much more than believing certain truths about God. It's that we will be increasingly

transformed in the very depths of our being by the one who's taken up residence there.

But that's not all.

## PRAY THAT YOU UNDERSTAND THE LIMITLESS DIMENSIONS OF JESUS' LOVE (3:17B-19).

---

Verses 17 to 19 say:

that you, being rooted and grounded in 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. (Ephesians 3:17-19)

It's strange. Again Paul prays for something, in a sense, that's already true. He prays that we'll grasp the love of Christ. I find that most people who are Christians get this at some level. Little kids can sing, "Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so."

But there's a level at which we really don't get it. A lot of us have this picture of God who's perpetually disappointed with us. We try to obey God, but for a lot of us the motivation is about duty or obligation than as a response to God's love.

I'll put it like this. In every marriage, there's a time where one spouse looks at the other and says, "Do you really love me?" At one level, I'm sure that they know their spouse loves them, but at that moment they don't want to just know it. They want to experience it at the very depths of their being. They want to grasp it.

A 10-year-old boy was in the hospital and was quite sick. One day he awoke to see his mother sitting beside his bed, quietly crying. As he saw his mother crying, it overwhelmed him and he blurted out, "Why Mum, you do love me!" Of course, that finished her off and she ran from the room. If you had asked him if he was loved by his parents the day before, he would have said yes. But at that moment he really grasped his mother's love for him. This is Paul's

prayer for us: that we will not just know about Christ's love but really grasp it. You even see this in Paul's prayer: it's that we will know something that surpasses knowledge. It's that we'll really get it, and really grasp it.

The result of this is found in verse 19: "that you may be filled with all the fullness of God." This means essentially that we will become spiritually mature, so that we will become all that God wants us to be. In other words, if we're to grow spiritually into the people we're meant to be, it begins with grasping – really getting – the limitless dimensions of God's love. It won't come from theological education or from years of attending church. It will come from really grasping Christ's love so that it becomes real to us, as real as the person next to you.

So let me ask you: have you experienced this lately? Have you really grasped the limitless dimensions of Christ's love? It's a gift from God; it's something God has to give us, but we can ask him for it. We can pray that we'll really get the breadth and length and heights and depths of the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge. Pray for it. Christianity is more than a head-job. It's about really grasping the love of Christ. It will change us like nothing else will.

### PRAY THIS WAY BECAUSE GOD IS ABLE AND GOD IS WORTHY (3:20-21).

---

And lest you think that this prayer is asking too much, Paul concludes:

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. (Ephesians 3:20-21)

God is able to do this! God is worthy of this pursuit, and God is able to make this kind of change in our lives.

That's why we see growth as multifaceted. What do I want for

you? I want you to do more than believe. I want you to grow in your knowledge of God. I want you to grow in your worship of God — that you would see and value him more and more. I want you to grow in your obedience to God. All of this happens as God brings this change about in our lives.

That's what I want for you. Pray to grow in every dimension of your faith. God is able, and he can do it!

## *How Habits Help You Grow (Deuteronomy 6:4-12)*

**Big Idea:** Know and love God by building habits.

I want to talk to you for a few minutes about habits.

A few years ago I came across this excellent book on habits. It was the first time that I had even considered the importance of building habits for living well. But I filed it away and didn't do much with it, other than think that it was an interesting book to read.

Then, a few years ago, Char began to follow a habit-based program that changed her life. Her health improved dramatically as she began to eat and drink differently. Now I had firsthand evidence that habits work, at least when it comes to getting in better shape.

But then we began to wonder: could habits also help us grow spiritually? What do habits have to do with our walk with God? I came books like *Habits of Grace*, and articles like this one:

Your perseverance, under God, is in your habits. Heaven and hell hangs on habits. Show me a man's habits, and you'll give me a glimpse into his very soul. The habits you develop and sustain today will affect whether you persevere till the end or make shipwreck of the faith.

Simply put, your habits are one of the most important things about you.

That got my attention. Habits aren't just a life hack. They're essential for how we live our lives. They're crucial to what it means to follow God.

And so today I want to talk to you about habits. **My thesis is simple: you need to develop habits that put you in the path of grace.** And just so you don't think that I'm making this up or just borrowing from books, I want to take us to an important passage in the Hebrew Scriptures.

This is one of the most important passages in all of the Old Testament. It's the Shema — the centerpiece of the morning and evening prayer services. Jesus affirmed the command in this passage as the greatest commandment, the heart of what God requires from us.

And here's what we learn. Three things.

## GOD CALLS US TO KNOW AND LOVE HIM. (6:4-5)

---

The question is still as relevant today as it ever is: What does God want from us? The answer this passage gives us is clear:

Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. (Deuteronomy 6:4-5)

**Here's the heart of what God wants from us. First: to understand who God is.** In a world with hundreds of competing gods, God asserts his exclusive identity as the only true God. He is incomparable. As he says a little earlier about his saving acts: "To you it was shown, that you might know that the LORD is God; there is no other besides him" (Deuteronomy 4:35).

This was true when God rescued them from Egypt. Imagine how much more true this is for those of us who know more of God — for those of us who have not just been rescued from slavery, but

have been rescued from sin and death. God has saved and rescued us so that we may know that the LORD is God, and there is no one else like him.

Even today there are many competing gods that demand your loyalty. The heart of what God wants is first for us to understand that he has no rival. There is no-one else like him. God has no rivals. It's all about him.

Logically, the second part of what God wants from us follows. **Second: God wants our devotion, loyalty, and love.** If God is who he says he is, then there's no option. He is worthy of all of our love. It makes sense that we should love him wholeheartedly in light of who he is and what he's done for us.

This is the heart of what the Christian life is all about. The most important fact you can know about God is this: God is God. There is nobody else like him. Nothing else comes anywhere close to deserving our loyalty, love, and adoration.

How should we respond? We should respond by loving him back. As Chris Wright says, "There are no limits on loving God. You can never say you have loved him enough." Loving him completely will change every part of our lives: our relationships, our sexuality, our careers, our money, everything.

That's the first thing we learn in this passage. God wants us to know him and love him, holding nothing back.

But here's the next thing we learn.

## WE'RE IN DANGER OF FORGETTING GOD INSTEAD. (6:10-12)

---

I love the realism of this passage. It gets right to the heart of our problem as human beings. Look at verses 10 to 12 with me:

And when the LORD your God brings you into the land that he swore to your fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give you—with great and good cities that you did not build, and houses full of all good things that you did not fill, and cisterns that you did



not dig, and vineyards and olive trees that you did not plant—and when you eat and are full, then take care lest you forget the LORD, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. (Deuteronomy 6:10-12)

Here's the reality about us. We've already seen that God has no rivals. There is no other god like him. Nobody else is worthy of our worship.

You know what the biggest rival to God is in our hearts? Not Baal or Allah or some other deity who doesn't even exist. The greatest rival to God in our hearts is his gifts. It's cities, houses full of good things, food, and the good life. Moses warns the people: the greatest danger to their souls is that they will love the gifts of God more than they will love God himself.

It's possible for our souls to be so satisfied with the gifts of God that we have no hunger left for God, the one for whom our souls were created. John Piper nails it:

### **God's Greatest Adversaries Are His Gifts**

The greatest enemy of hunger for God is not poison but apple pie. It is not the banquet of the wicked that dulls our appetite for heaven, but endless nibbling at the table of the world. It is not the X-rated video, but the prime-time dribble of triviality we drink in every night. For all the ill that Satan can do, when God describes what keeps us from the banquet table of his love, it is a piece of land, a yoke of oxen, and a wife (Luke 14:18–20). The greatest adversary of love to God is not his enemies but his gifts. And the most deadly appetites are not for the poison of evil, but for the simple pleasures of earth. For when these replace an appetite for God himself, the idolatry is scarcely recognizable, and almost incurable.

The good life can become a deadly substitute for God. The greatest threats to your soul are probably not bad things but good things, because those good things can take the place of God in your life. The greatest danger to your life may not be another god, but a closet full of clothes, a great RRSP, local craft beer, a vacation on YYZ Deals.

This is what makes life in Liberty Village so dangerous. We live

amazing lives here. Toronto is the seventh most livable city in the world. And within Toronto, Liberty Village is the 59th best community, according to Toronto Life — even though we know it's much higher than that. This means that we are especially in danger of living such a good life that we will eat and be full, and then forget the LORD.

God calls us to know and love him, but we're in danger of forgetting God instead.

What should we do then?

## DEVELOP HABITS THAT HELP YOU KNOW AND LOVE SO YOU DON'T FORGET. (6:6-9)

---

Verses 6 to 9 say:

And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

What will help us know and love God despite all the distractions? We're to take this commitment to God and allow it to permeate all of our lives. Notice the concentric circles moving from the inside out:

- our hearts as individuals
- our households
- the public — public declarations of our faith in God as signs on our hands, frontlets between our eyes, writing on the doorposts of our houses.

It's likely that the last instructions were meant literally — which

is why many started wearing phylacteries, small boxes on the forehead that contained Scripture.

Moses called the people to remember by constant repetition, and weaving their faith and trust in God into every part of their lives.

**To know and love God means that we take repeated action to integrate that knowledge and love into every part of our lives: private, family, and public. And there are certain actions we can take that will help.**

God's call on your life is to know and love him. You, like every other human being, are in danger of forgetting God. The solution is to develop habits — repeated actions — that keep your love for God at the center of every part of your life. In other words, repeated habits are crucial when it comes to following Jesus.

So let me ask you: what repeated actions can you take in your life to cultivate the knowledge and love of God in your life?

It's easy to read a passage like this and leave it at a theoretical level. Next week we're going to look at three habits that all of us need to build into our lives.

But today I want to ask you to do something practical. This passage told the Israelites to "bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates."

I'm not going to ask you to wear something on your hand or between your eyes this week. I thought about it, but I decided against it. I also considered asking you to write something on the doorposts of your house, but I thought the condo corporation may not like that.

But here's what I am going to ask you to do. When you came in today you were given a sticky note. I want to ask you to write something from this passages and to post it on your bathroom mirror at home this week. It will be a habitual reminder that will help you remember God, especially when you're so satisfied with your life that you're tempted to forget him.

I'm going to ask you to go even farther. I decided to splurge and give you more than one sticky note. Maybe you'll want to get crazy and post a reminder somewhere else — in your wallet, or on your laptop, or somewhere else where you will see it during the day.

The goal is to remind you to know and love God, and because you are likely to forget this, to use these as reminders in your life to remember him. And then I want you to come back next week as we look at three core habits that we all need.

Know and love God by building habits.

## *Three Core Habits (Philippians 4:1-9)*

**Big Idea:** Stand firm through fellowship, prayer, and Scripture.

I'm fascinated by the life of a man named Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

Bonhoeffer was a German pastor and theologian from the past century. He died at the end of World War II as a Christian martyr and as a resistor to the Nazi regime.

He got his Ph.D. at age 21. One of the leading theologians of the day called his Ph.D. thesis a "theological miracle." Bonhoeffer became obsessed with the idea of God's presence among his people.

He was so disillusioned by the condition of the German church that he started a resistance movement called the Confessing Church, insisting that Christ, not Hitler, was the head of the church. The Confessing Church came under all kinds of pressure. The official church made it illegal to mention the names of anybody who joined the Confessing Church. They shut down giving to the church, and eventually its meetings.

But Bonhoeffer started an underground seminary of people who would take the gospel seriously. He believed that Christians could stand firm against the pressures of the day and follow Jesus as they

engaged in certain practices. This is where he wrote two of his most popular books, *The Cost of Discipleship* and *Life Together*.

But some of his friends thought he was hardcore. After *Life Together* came out, one of his friends came to visit Bonhoeffer in the underground seminary and suggested that maybe Bonhoeffer should lighten up.

Bonhoeffer took him out on a boat and rowed across the river. He took him to the top of a hill where they saw Nazi fighter planes landing and taking off, and soldiers moving about.

Bonhoeffer spoke of a new generation of Germans in training, whose disciplines were formed “for a kingdom ... of hardness and cruelty.” It would be necessary, he explained, to propose a superior discipline (of life among the Christians) if the Nazis were to be defeated.

“You have to be stronger than these tormentors that you find everywhere today...” (*Strange Glory*)

They got back into the boat and road back to seminary.

“You have to be stronger than these tormenters.” As one preacher says:

Here is Bonhoeffer pointing at a ragged little school for preachers, and then pointing at Hitler amassing his troops, and in the prophetic tradition of contrast, he says that this (the people of God) must be stronger than that (the discipline of the world around us). This must be stronger than that.

This little school that probably only trained 50-60 pastors produced a community so strong that today we talk about the fall of the Third Reich and the rise of the church. This must be stronger than that.

The question today is the same. How can we be formed so that we live in a way that’s faithful? How can we grow?

Surprisingly, this is the same question that a small group of Christians faced almost two thousand years ago in a place called Philippi, located in modern-day Greece. Philippi was a Roman city deeply entrenched in Roman political and social life. It was not an

easy place to be a Christian. Paul is writing from prison to a small group of young, scared, and discouraged Christians about how to live genuinely Christian lives even when society is pushing you to adapt. And so Paul writes to them with an agenda:

Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of you that you are *standing firm* in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel, and not frightened in anything by your opponents. (Philippians 1:27-28)

...work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure. (Philippians 2:12-13)

The question remains: how are they to do this? And in the last half of the chapter, he gets very practical. In chapter 3 he tells them to avoid false teachers — something that continues to be very important today! But then in chapter 4 he describes a set of practices that are going to be crucial for us if we're going to grow.

In chapter 4, Paul describes the normal Christian life. The three practices that he mentions in this passage are essential for every follower of Jesus. If we are going to follow Jesus faithfully, then we need to build these three habits into our lives.

Philippians 4:1 says:

Therefore, my brothers, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm thus in the Lord, my beloved.

There's the command: stand firm. Hold your ground. Maintain your position. In the face of mounting pressure all around you, stand firm in your faith.

That's the command. But how do we actually do it? Paul lists three practices — I'm going to call them habits — that are essential for all of us.

LIVE IN CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY (DESPITE THE

---

## OBSTACLES). (4:2-3)

---

Paul's writing to a church, and in the middle of this he addresses both two ladies within the church, as well as the entire church around them:

I entreat Euodia and I entreat Syntyche to agree in the Lord. Yes, I ask you also, true companion, help these women, who have labored side by side with me in the gospel together with Clement and the rest of my fellow workers, whose names are in the book of life. (Philippians 4:2-3)

We have no idea what was going on between these two women. They were active members of the church, and there was obviously some disagreement between them. In some ways I wish we had more information about them, but in other ways I'm glad we don't. We see in the example of these two women that living within the church is hard. I could come up with about 20 reasons right now why we shouldn't get along.

But Paul tells them to agree in the Lord. Be united. They have disagreements over something, but they have something even bigger they can agree upon. He calls them to think the same way in the Lord. Not only that, but he goes on and asks his coworker in the church — possibly to help out to restore their relationship with each other, to restore the community that has been broken.

The issue that they faced in Philippi was personal conflict. But there are all kinds of other issues that can get in the way of Christian community as well. One of the most powerful today is individualism: the belief that we don't need other Christians to grow; that we can do it alone without anyone else. But Paul says that we've got to pursue the same mind in Jesus, to stand against anything that will pull us away from genuine Christian relationships, because we need each other to grow.

I've seen both of these problems kill Christian community: conflict and apathy. To be honest, I don't know which is worse. But



it's enough of an issue that it's the first thing that Paul addresses after telling the church to stand firm. If we're going to stand firm, if we're going to grow, our agreement in Christ must be stronger than all the things that pull us apart.

I mentioned Dietrich Bonhoeffer at the beginning. He wrote this in *Life Together*: "If you scorn the fellowship of the brethren, you reject the call of Jesus Christ, and thus your solitude can only be hurtful to you." We need the church. But that's not all we need.

#### PRAY. (4:4-7)

---

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice. Let your reasonableness be known to everyone. The Lord is at hand; do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. (Philippians 4:4-7)

We tend to think about prayer as something we *should* do, like flossing our teeth and eating broccoli. Paul sees prayer as something we must do. He sees it as a way to manage our anxiety, to get the peace that we've been promised. Prayer isn't just a spiritual discipline to Paul. It's a necessity.

If you read verses 4 to 7, you'll see that there are some pretty unusual qualities Paul wants them to exhibit: joy, reasonableness, a non-anxiousness, and a peace that can't be explained by the circumstances. Have you ever met someone who is joyful, reasonable, non-anxious, and peaceful even when life is hard? I have.

But we can only live this way if we're prayerful. Paul pictures a way of life in which we are in such constant communication with God that an entirely new way of existing begins to take shape in our lives. We begin to act and feel differently.

This is the second way to stand firm. If we're going to look and act and think differently from the world, we need to engage in

fellowship and then live our lives in prayer, not as an obligation but as a way of life. But there's one more habit we see in this passage.

### FILL YOUR MIND WITH SCRIPTURE. (4:8-9)

---

What shapes your mind? What shapes how you think about the world the most? Verses 8-9 say:

Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me—practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you. (Philippians 4:8-9)

Paul is calling the Philippians to a way of life that's different: one that won't tolerate divisions between them, and one that is so saturated with prayer that there's something different about the way that they live. And now he calls them to think differently.

Paul never mentions what to do in this passage, but he doesn't mention how to do it. But I will. The best way to fill your mind with what's true, honorable, just, pure, lovely, commendable, excellent, and worth of praise is to fill your mind with Scripture. There is nothing that will change your life as much as building a regular habit of Scripture intake into your life — not just reading it but filling your mind with it and thinking about these things.

And so Dietrich Bonhoeffer could stand on a hill looking at the Nazi fighting forces, and go back to his little seminary knowing that they had to build a set of practices that were stronger than the practices of the Nazis. And we today must realize that we need a set of practices that are stronger than all of those in the world that will shape us into the image of this world without us even knowing it.

How can we grow? Growth is founded on what Jesus has done for us: in his sacrificial death in our place that frees us from guilt and

gives us new life. But then if you want to stand firm and grow you will need three practices:

- You will need to commit to living the Christian life in Christian community
- You will need to develop the habit of prayer
- You will need to fill your mind with Scripture

This must be stronger than that. We need you to build these habits.

I've never met anyone who's encountered God's grace and who's practiced these three habits from the heart—reading or listening to the Bible, praying, and pursuing worship and fellowship within a church community—who hasn't grown. Conversely, I've never met a single person who's grown spiritually who hasn't engaged in these three core habits. These are the foundational habits that we're called to practice for the rest of our lives. We never get beyond them. They shape us and help us grow in our joyful pursuit of God and in our love for others. (*How to Grow*)

We never get beyond them. Are you ready to build these three habits into your life?

## *Practices to Propel Your Growth (Colossians 3:1-17)*

**Big Idea:** Work on fixing your wanters. Kill sin. And engage in practices that help you to grow.

The movie *City Slickers* is a comedy about a man who's 39 years old and in the middle of a mid-life crisis. He's friends with two other guys who are also experiencing a mid-life crises, so they go on a cattle drive in Colorado. There's a fascinating scene that goes something like this:

Curly: Do you know what the secret of life is? points index finger skyward This.

Mitch: Your finger?

Curly: One thing. Just one thing. You stick to that and the rest don't mean anything.

Mitch: But, what is the "one thing?"

Curly: smiles and points his finger at Mitch That's what you have to find out.

That's a pretty good point from a pretty goofy meaning. One thing ultimately matters in life, and we need to find out what that one thing is and then do it.

Two weeks ago I told you what that one thing is. We looked

at Deuteronomy 6, and I told you this: **we exist to know and love God.** That's it. That's why you're on this earth. It's what you were meant to do. If you do this, you will have accomplished your purpose in life. If you don't do this, you will have failed. We said this a few weeks ago in the New City Catechism:

**How and why did God create us?**

God created us male and female in his own image to know him, love him, live with him, and glorify him. And it is right that we who were created by God should live to his glory.

That's why you exist. Everything else is secondary.

But then we saw that we're prone to forget God. And the main reason why, according to Deuteronomy, is because of God's gifts. It's because of this:

...great and good cities that you did not build, and houses full of all good things that you did not fill, and cisterns that you did not dig, and vineyards and olive trees that you did not plant—and when you eat and are full... (Deuteronomy 6:10-11)

And so Moses taught us that we need practices — I'm calling them habits — that will remind us of our purpose: that we exist to know and love God.

Last week we built on this. We talked about three core habits that we need:

- to participate in worship and fellowship within a church
- to pray
- to immerse ourselves in Scripture

These are simple and yet costly practices. It matters that we do these consistently rather than perfectly. I don't know anyone who's grown who doesn't engage in these three practices. Everyone I respect who is mature practices these three on a regular basis. And

I don't know anyone who practices these three from the heart who hasn't grown. They are essential for our growth.

I want to stop here and emphasize this. My hope for you as your pastor is that you know and love God. And I believe that these three practices or habits are essential for all of us. We need them! So I want to ask you — urge you — to take this seriously. I want you to walk about of here saying, "I exist to know and love God. And because I'll forget him, I need to prioritize worship and fellowship, prayer, and reading or listening to the Bible." These are three habits I want all of you to develop. You won't do it perfectly. You will struggle and fail. That's okay. But keep practicing them, because they will help you to accomplish your main purpose in life.

So this is the foundation. Know and love God. Practice the three core habits. But today we're going to build on this as we look at this passage. Once you build these three core habits, it's time to start building other habits too.

Let's look at Colossians 3, because it will take us where we need to go. Paul gives us three instructions in this passage.

### WORK ON YOUR WANTER. (3:1-4)

---

If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory. (Colossians 3:1-4)

Hmm. This sounds a lot like what we just talked about: your purpose is to know and love God. Paul remind us in this passage that our purpose in life is simple: to seek the things that are above; to set our minds on them. It's a call to be preoccupied with Jesus presence and agenda.

I used to live seven kilometers from here in a bungalow. We lived there for 20 years. But then we bought a condo in Liberty Village. I

was both terrified and excited out of my mind. I had downloaded all the photos from the real estate listing and kept them on my phone. I would look at them pretty regularly because I was excited about the day that I would move in.

I think that's what Paul is saying here. If you have put your faith in Christ, you've been raised with him. His resurrection life and power is now yours. Your future is with Jesus. The old you is gone; your new life is hidden in Jesus.

Verses 3-4 contain the good news that we all need. In the past, Jesus died, and when he died and was raised, we died and were raised. His death and resurrection became ours. Our lives are so intertwined with Jesus now that everything that we are in Christ: his life has become ours, and we are hidden in him. In the present, we are completely different people. In the future, our heavenly identity is real and secure. You don't see it now, but it will be revealed one day. This is the reality that everyone who trusts in Jesus gets to enjoy now and in the future.

So live in that reality now. Become preoccupied with it right now, because this is way more valuable and relevant than anything you're enjoying today!

The word "seek" is set in the present imperative. You could translate it, "Keep on seeking...keep on setting your minds on things that are above." **What we seek, what we set our minds on determines the direction of our lives.**

It's like we all have spiritual Attention Deficit Disorder. We're continually being distracted by other things. And God commands us here to keep redirecting our attention. Paul is saying, "Hey! Back here. You just got distracted." We need skills to catch when we lose our focus and to bring ourselves back. The fact that this is given as a command implies that we're able to keep this command. We can figure out what to do to keep bringing ourselves back to Jesus, even though we'll continually struggle with the temptation to lose our focus.

God wants to change us, not at the level of our behavior, but at

the level of our desires. God wants to change our wanters. Since the purpose of your life is to know and love God, one of the most important things you can and must do is to keep on setting your desires on God. Keep on focusing on him as your greatest goal.

That's the first command. Don't be seduced by lesser desires. Keep your focus there. Work on your wanters.

But then there's more.

### KILL SIN. (3:5-11)

---

"Put to death therefore what is earthly in you..." (Colossians 3:5). What's interesting is that Paul gets very specific about what he's talking about, and everything he mentions is more than acceptable today: "sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry..." There are a whole lot of behaviors that don't even look bad anymore. But Paul says that we need to put them to death. This is a license to kill. It's permission to be violent with our old way of life. Don't put it in the corner and tell it to behave. In the words of John Owen, kill it, or it will be killing you.

There's a myth out there that we just need to focus on Jesus' love and not worry about things like sin. That's dangerous. That's a lie. Paul's already told us that we died with Christ. That means that we need to kill anything in our lives that doesn't match our new lives. Get rid of any behavior that doesn't match who you are in Jesus.

Notice verse 6: "On account of these the wrath of God is coming." Read that again. Whoa. You thought that God's wrath was something that belongs to the Old Testament? Not at all. If you are a follower of Jesus, then you've been saved from God's wrath. Romans 5:9 says, "Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God." But Paul reminds us here: persistent sinful behavior will bring God's judgment. Don't worry about sin so much out in the world. Let's worry about sin here! "Paul tells us in Romans 11: 22:



“Note then the kindness and the severity of God.” You don’t have a complete picture of God until you see both.

Look at the mercy of God and the wrath of God. Look at the tenderness of God and the toughness of God. Look at the salvation of God and the judgment of God. Look at the assistance of God and the opposition of God. Look at the friendship of God and the fierceness of God. Don’t look only at his gentler side. It will be bad for your faith. (John Piper)

I watched a horror movie recently called *A Quiet Place*. It was about these monsters that couldn’t see you, but they could hear you. The moment you made a noise they would come after you. This woman lost her child and her husband to a monster. And so when that monster came after her and the rest of her family, she didn’t hesitate. The movie ends with pumping the shotgun and getting ready to shoot any monster that comes her way. She’s ready to kill, because if she doesn’t, the monsters will kill her and everyone around her.

Sin is like that. Sin isn’t cute. Sin isn’t harmless. Sin will destroy you and everyone you love. God takes it seriously, and we must too. If you’re aware of any sin in your life, kill it! Don’t coddle what will kill you.

Work on your wanters, and one more thing as we close:

### ENGAGE IN PRACTICES TO HELP YOU GROW. (3:12-17)

---

Verses 12 to 17 unleash a series of behaviors that are compatible with our new identities. He lists a series of practices that we must put on. The one thing that they all have in common is that they all foster Christian community. We need to build new habits so that we can grow together. He lists a set of practices that will change us, and that fit our new lives. He calls for unity in the local church. If we’re going to grow, we need each other. And we need to do certain things together. The church is essential for Christian growth.

Here’s the sum of what I’m trying to tell you today. **Work on**

**fixing your wanter. Kill sin. And engage in practices that help you to grow.**

There's only one thing that matters: that you know and love God. But that doesn't come naturally to us. It's why we need habits. We need habits that will help us to kill sin and to increase our community.

Friends, I want to call you to practice the three basic habits. And then, once you have those down, I want to call you to begin to supplement with supporting habits. Take this seriously. Your life depends on it.

Work on fixing your wanter. Kill sin. And engage in practices that help you to grow.

## *Consider and Imitate (Hebrews 13:7-8)*

**Big Idea:** Remember, consider, and imitate those who taught you the Word.

I want to introduce you to Don Taylor — Mr. Taylor, as we called him.

I wish I could show you a picture of him, but I don't have one. I can tell you a few things about him, though. He was loud. He spoke in one volume, which was a problem when we showed up for church late and he was the usher. "Hello, Dash family!" he would bellow as we tried to sneak in. It was embarrassing.

He was a printer. He worked at a print shop back in the days when they would set type manually. He took us to visit his print shop one time, and it was the coolest thing ever.

He had a family, although I only new his son.

But here's the main thing I knew about him: he was my Sunday school teacher. Every year in church we would line up and be promoted to the next grade. It wasn't a big church, so there were three of us: myself, and two twins, Ted and Fred. Every year we were promoted, and every year we waited to see who our new teacher would be. And every year we would discover that Don Taylor was promoted too.

And so for years of our lives, we spent Sunday mornings in a dingy basement. I'm here to tell you today that Don Taylor changed my life. A lot of what I learned about the Bible I learned from Don Taylor. Certainly, I learned what it means to follow Jesus with passion from Don Taylor. And I'm not alone. The three boys that were in that classroom — Ted, Fred, and me — all grew to love the Lord. In fact, all three of us are in pastoral ministry today, and I think it's due, in part, to the influence of this man.

What I want to do with you this morning is simple. I want to follow a biblical command that we read in Hebrews 13:7. I have an agenda today. I believe there are a lot of Don Taylors present here. God has a big purpose for your life. God loves to use people like you and me to accomplish his purposes and to make a difference in the lives of others.

But most of us think that we're not all that special. We have all kinds of reasons why God could never use someone like us. We're too ordinary, too flawed.

Today's passage tells us three things we need to do. First:

## REMEMBER YOUR LEADERS

---

Verse 7 says, "Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God." The word *remember* is in the present active tense, which means this is something we're to do on an ongoing basis. It was usually a term that was reserved for great religious, political, and military leaders. The culture would remember the great heroes and elevate their lives, just like Americans remember George Washington or Abraham Lincoln.

But the writer tells us to do this not with great heroic leaders, but with those who spoke the word of God to us. Remember them. Keep them in mind. Reflect on their lives. Give careful thought to how they lived and what you can learn from them.

Most scholars tend to think that the writer is talking about people

who had already died. It's also clear from verse 17 that not everybody who read this letter was good at honoring leaders. It's a little like today. We tend to be pretty distrustful toward leaders, so much so that it's hard to be a leader because of the shots you take. Someone has said, "If you want to make people happy, don't be a leader. Sell ice cream instead." Leading is a way to put yourself in the firing line.

Into this context, Hebrews says to do something different with leaders. On an ongoing basis, remember them. Whom should we remember? In particular, those who spoke to us the Word of God. The fact that you're here this morning probably means, at some point, that someone spoke God's Word to you. For me, it was Don Taylor. It was also my childhood pastor, Denis Gibson. Neither of them were perfect. In fact, in many ways they were quite ordinary. But Hebrews instructs us to remember them.

So I want to ask you to do this right now. Who first spoke God's Word to you? Was it a Sunday school teacher? A pastor? A parent? Remember them. Bring them to mind right now.

But that's not all. Hebrews continues:

## CONSIDER THE OUTCOME OF THEIR LIVES

---

Jesus gives us an important principle in Matthew 12:33:

Either make the tree good and its fruit good, or make the tree bad and its fruit bad, for the tree is known by its fruit.

Jesus isn't giving horticultural advice. He's talking about leaders. Some leaders produce bad fruit. I've known pastors who started out well but got off track. It's not a pretty thing. They began to wobble in their theology, or they began to get a bit cynical. It didn't look that serious at first, but it ended really badly in every single case. They produced bad fruit, and the results were devastating.

But some leaders produce good fruit. They prove that they're good trees because the evidence is all around them. And Hebrews

says, "Consider the outcome of their way of life." Think about the total sum of their accomplishments in life.

When you're young, you have good days and bad days. It's really hard to evaluate someone's life when they're young. But I've discovered that these patterns become deeply ingrained. As we get older, our characters become deeply defined in one of two directions. Some people become nasty and cynical. I've met some grumpy old seniors, and it's not attractive. But I've also met some people who have grown sweeter and better as time goes on.

Hebrews tells us to consider these people. Think of those who taught you God's Word, and whose lives have amounted to something significant.

And so I think of Don Taylor. He's still alive. I talked to him a few months ago, and he's just as passionate about Jesus as he was when I was a child. He still loves God and he's still serving the church.

I think of Denis Gibson, my childhood pastor. He taught me so much. He's retired now, and he's legally blind. He isn't able to do much. He's done what so many men fail to do: to give up a role that provides identity, and to find meaning in God when you lose career and health. He still loves God in the latter years of his life.

I think of Leila Whitcombe, a pastor's wife. I met her when I was a student pastor in my early twenties. She was in her 80s, but she seemed younger and more passionate about God than I was.

By the way, you pastor is one of these people. I was talking with one of my friends who attended a church that Deric used to pastor. He had grown up in weak churches. He didn't have a good grasp on God's Word. He only sat under Pastor Deric's ministry for a short time, but it changed the direction of his life. The way that he skillfully handled God's Word changed him forever. Remember such a person. Consider the outcome of his life.

I've read that only 30% of leaders last. Only a few finish well. Isolate those who finish well, and figure out what they did that led them there.

Remember those who taught you God's Word. In particular, consider the outcome of their lives. What made them that way? How were they able to withstand all the negativity and discouragement and finish well? Remember them. Hold them in high esteem. And consider how they finished, giving thought to how you want to finish as well.

Finally:

## IMITATE THEIR FAITH

---

Verses 7 and 8 say:

Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God. Consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.

Now we get to the real point. The writer to the Hebrews wants us to go farther than just remembering and considering. He wants to imitate them.

When I was in seminary, I sat under the ministry of a great preacher. I sang in the choir, so I had a view from the back of how he preached. He would shuffle his feet back and forth as he preached. Well, guess what I did when I began to preach myself? I did the same thing.

We all do this. We think we're original, but we're all imitating someone in our lives.

The writer to the Hebrews knew that the church was in danger. It seems like some of the Christians in that church were ready to abandon Christianity to avoid persecution. How do we avoid giving up when we feel like it? This verse tells us. Imitate those who taught us the Word and who stayed faithful to the end. Follow their example.

But let's not make a mistake. You may think that Don Taylor is the hero, or that Denis Gibson is the hero, or Leila Whitcombe is the

hero. Not so. The real hero is Jesus. Verse 8 says, “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.”

At first it looks like verse 8 has nothing to do with verse 7. But verse 8 has everything to do with verse 7. What made Don Taylor and the others in my life so impactful? One word: Jesus. We’re told to imitate their faith, and their faith was in Jesus. The people who live the most impactful lives are those who know and love Jesus, who know and love the one who left heaven, lived a righteous life, died in our place, rose again, and who now reigns at God’s right hand.

And here’s the great thing: one day the leaders who taught us the Word won’t be there, but Jesus will *always* be there, unchanging through the years. His “help, grace and power are permanently at his people’s disposal.... He never needs to be replaced, and nothing can be added to his perfect work” (F.F. Bruce).

That’s why I wrote *How to Grow*. I’ve been given an incredible legacy. God has brought people like Don Taylor and Denis Gibson and Leila Whitcombe into my life. I wrote this book to follow this command — to remember, consider, and imitate, so I can grow to be just like them, and to influence others as they did.

I’m pretty sure the same is true in your life. And he’s given us this instruction: **Remember, consider, and imitate those who taught you the Word.** And he will use your life, just as he used theirs.

So let me ask you: Who is the Don Taylor of your life? Who taught you the Word? Who finished well? Who stayed so close to Jesus that they withstood all the pressures to pull away?

Remember them. Consider their lives. And then imitate them. Not only will you live like them, but your life will influence others too. Your life will make an eternal difference.

Lord, thank you for Jesus. Thank you for his life, death, resurrection, and rain. Thank you for those who taught us the Word about Jesus. May we remember them, consider the outcome of their lives, and may we imitate them. And would you use us despite our weaknesses so that we make an eternal difference in the lives



of others because we've kept this command. We pray this in Jesus' name, Amen.