

SPIRITUAL GROWTH

As we enter the New Year, there are endless possibilities of things we might do, and many of those things are very good things. But there is one thing that sums up all that is good and godly. It is very simple—we are to please God. That’s what we are here for. If we are able to do great things, but those great things don’t please God, we will have failed. As we begin our year, I want to spend a little time talking about what it is to please God. Today, I want to talk about pleasing God by growing spiritually.

When God created this world, He did an amazing thing. He gave living things the capacity to grow. It is a rewarding experience to plant seeds in a garden, and then see those seeds become a harvest of fresh vegetables. It is a joy for a parent to see his child growing into a fine adult. It is also rewarding to pursue some kind of career and to grow in that career. Growth is good. Stagnation is not. The greatest and most important kind of growth is spiritual growth. God has made us so that we can grow in our experience with Him, and it pleases Him when we do.

Ephesians 4:14,15 - Be no longer children, but grow up in Christ.

2 Peter 3:18 - but grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Growth is the goal of the Christian. If you are the same Christian today that you were a year ago, then you have not done what you should have done. If you are the same in 6 months as you are now, you have not done what God wants you to do. God wants you to grow.

WHAT DOES SPIRITUAL MATURITY LOOK LIKE?

1. A SPIRITUALLY MATURE PERSON’S LIFE IS FULLY DEVOTED TO CHRIST

Colossians 3:4, “When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.”

Philippians 1:20-21, “I eagerly expect and hope that I will in no way be ashamed, but will have sufficient courage so that now as always Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death. For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.

A lot of people imagine their life as a pie with different pieces representing different segments of their life. You’ve got a work segment of your life you’ve got a financial

segment, you've got a relationship segment, and then, over here we've got Jesus as a piece of the pie.

As you grow in maturity, Jesus is not a piece of the pie. Jesus is the whole pie. He influences everything in your life – your finances, your relationships, your goals and ambitions- your career. He's at the core of everything you do.

2. A SPIRITUALLY MATURE PERSON'S GREATEST DESIRE IS TO GLORIFY GOD

There are a lot of good people in this world, but a good person is not necessarily a spiritual person. Good people can help you physically-they can reach out and give you a helping hand. Godly people can help you spiritually-they can lead you closer to the Lord. Good people may have a passion for living. Godly people have a passion for God. When you get around them, you sense the fact that their lives are being motivated by something deeper than their own happiness or even the good of other people.

For example, Paul wrote in 1 Tim 1:17, "Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen."

That sums up the motivation of Paul's life. The thing that drove him on, the thing that kept him going through some very hard times was his great desire to see God glorified.

Someone wrote: My friend Sheila has coped for years with the fact that her youngest child Taylor has autism. She has endured the worry, the fear, the scares and the scenes that are all present in the life of a mother who has a child with autism. She has rose from exhaustion to change his no longer toddler pants and to answer his cries she does not understand. She has accepted all the limitations and challenges that autism has brought into her son's life, her life, and her family's life as well.

She has weathered all the storms of Taylor's autistic temper and uncontrollable tantrums. Even during the times her energy was spent and her own nerves were almost completely gone she has coped. Sheila, time and time again has prevailed over the frustration and discouragement of medicine being prescribed and tried to yet no avail... no cure. Not too long ago, Sheila and I were discussing miraculous healings from the Lord. Sheila for many, many years has prayed for her son Taylor's complete healing. Others have prayed as well for Taylor's healing her family, her friends, and her church as well. I suspected and assumed this topic of miraculous healings would be a very painful topic for Sheila. As it turns out I could have never been more wrong. Throughout our conversation Sheila had no words of contempt, no feelings of betrayal, no thoughts of pity, and no questions asking God why Taylor had not been healed. Sheila shared that she feels God has led her to more wholly lean on Him through the trials and problems of having an autistic child. God has shown her more about Himself during her difficult days with her son. Sheila said, "Throughout my life I have tasted and seen God's healing, and I have also seen where God has allowed suffering to continue. I am fully convinced that God can be glorified in 'Either Way'. Whether the gift from God is healing or continued suffering,

God can be glorified 'Either Way.'" Sheila's testimony was a beacon of light for me, shining a new meaning on the words 'glorifying the Lord'. 'Either way', whether Taylor is healed or not, Sheila is still going to love and glorify the Lord. Sheila is unconditionally accepting God's exact plan of grace and mercy for her and Taylor... no matter what it is... regardless.

The underlying motivation of spiritually mature people is that God receives glory, honor and praise, no matter what. Paul said in;

Phil 1:20, "I eagerly expect and hope that I will in no way be ashamed, but will have sufficient courage so that now as always Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death."

3. A SPIRITUALLY MATURE PERSON HAS A GROWING DESIRE TO KNOW GOD BETTER

For some people words like religion and spirituality are the same thing, but they are not. Religion is an outward thing. It doesn't necessarily change you; you just do it.

Isaiah 29:13, "The Lord says: "These people come near to me with their mouth and honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. Their worship of me is made up only of rules taught by men."

The people Isaiah was talking about were religious people. They spoke well of God with their lips and went through some religious ceremonies. They may have appeared very impressive to those who saw them, but God was not impressed because He knew their hearts were not right. Jesus quoted this passage in Matthew and applied it to the Pharisees. The Pharisees were a strict religious group during the first century who dedicated themselves to keeping hundreds of religious laws, most of which they made up themselves.

Spirituality is a relationship, and the more you grow in that relationship, the more hungry you become to grow more.

David said in Psalm 63:1, " O God, you are my God, earnestly I seek you; my soul thirsts for you, my body longs for you, in a dry and weary land where there is no water."

The word "thirsty" is a strong one. If you are really thirsty, that thirst consumes your mind. All you can think about is water, and there is nothing that can substitute for it.

Philippians 3:10 "I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death...."

The driving desire of Paul's life was to know Christ better. At this point in his life, he had been a Christian for about 30 years, but he knew he hadn't even scratched the surface

when it came to knowing Christ. He was never satisfied with where he was spiritually. That's because knowing God is addictive. The more you know Him, the more you want to know Him. You can never get enough.

4. A SPIRITUALLY MATURE PERSON IS DEVELOPING DISCERNMENT

Proverbs 16:21 (ESV) "The wise of heart is called discerning, and sweetness of speech increases persuasiveness."

Psalm 119:125, "I am your servant; give me discernment that I may understand your statutes."

Discernment is the ability to see through something so that you see it as it really is and not as it appears to be. It gives you the ability to know when someone is sincere and when they are not. It gives you the ability to understand when someone is speaking God's truth and when they are in error. Discernment gives you the ability to know when your children are involving themselves in things that are not best for them, and the list goes on.

A farmer from Bulgaria, Mihail Janko, is convinced that his goat can discern a person's character. Janko claims that he can put pictures of people in front of the goat and the goat will show, by his behavior, whether the person in the picture is of good or bad character. Evidently, the goat head-butts pictures of "unpleasant people," but eats the pictures of pleasant people. Janko has even relied on the goat's special talent to help him choose boyfriends for his four daughters. Some of you parents would probably like to buy his goat.

Discernment is a sign of spiritual maturity. The author of Hebrews told his readers that they were immature babies who couldn't handle eating spiritual meat.

"Solid food is for the mature, who because of practice have their senses trained to discern good and evil" (Heb. 5:14).

5. A SPIRITUALLY MATURE PERSON IS GROWING IN PEACE

There is a painting titled "peace," It depicts waves crashing against the rocks in a violent storm. It seems anything but peaceful. But down in a small corner of the painting, tucked away in the rocks, there is a small bird sitting on her nest, totally oblivious to the storm. That's peace.

Have you ever noticed how many times the Bible talks about peace?

Psalm 37:11, "But the meek will inherit the land and enjoy great peace."

Psalm 119:165, "Great peace have they who love your law, and nothing can make them stumble."

2 Peter 1:2, "Grace and peace be yours in abundance through the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord."

People who grow spiritually grow in inner peace. That's because the more you grow, the bigger you will see God to be. How you live your life will be in direct proportion to how big you think God is. If you wake up in the morning and go through the day with a shrunken view of God, you will live in a constant state of fear and anxiety, because everything depends on you. If you live with a shrunken God, you won't seek God in faith when you have a need, because you're not really sure that prayer makes a difference. If you live with a shrunken God, you will become a slave to whatever other people think of you, because you don't live in the security of a big God's acceptance of you.

On the other hand, the more you grow spiritually, the bigger God becomes to you. Saint Augustine said, "Great art Thou, O Lord, and greatly to be praised; great is Thy power, and Thy wisdom infinite. And Thee would man praise; man, but a particle of Thy creation; man, that bears about him his mortality, the witness of his sin, the witness that Thou resistest the proud: Yet would man praise Thee; he, but a particle of Thy creation. Thou awakest us to delight in Thy praise; for Thou madest us for Thyself, and our heart is restless, until it repose in Thee."

Paul had a view of God who was big enough to handle all that life could throw at him.
Romans 11:33-36, "Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out! "Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor?" "Who has ever given to God, that God should repay him?" For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever! Amen"

Growing spiritually results in a life that replaces fear with praise.

6. A SPIRITUALLY MATURE PERSON DEMONSTRATES THE REALITY OF GOD TO THE UNBELIEVER

Like it or not, as believers in Jesus Christ, we represent God. We don't have a choice – it goes with the territory.

2 Corinthians 3:2-3, "You yourselves are our letter, written on our hearts, known and read by everybody. 3 You show that you are a letter from Christ, the result of our ministry, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts."

Every believer launches his or her own advertising campaign, which will positively or negatively impact the cause of Christ. The people of the world are not looking up to find God; they are looking around at those who profess to know him.

What is it that impresses the unbelievers? Will unbelievers be impressed by the fact that we meet regularly? That means nothing. All kinds of organizations meet every week.

Neither will unbelievers stand in awe of the fact that we have Bibles and read them. Many religions in the world have their own holy writings. As right as those things are, they do little to impress the average unbeliever. But when they see a life that is changed by the power of God that gets their attention.

HOW DO I GROW?

1. YOU MUST WANT TO GROW

When Jesus walked beside the Pool of Bethesda in Jerusalem (John 5), he saw hundreds of people who were waiting for a miracle. Archeologists tell us the Pool of Bethesda was roughly the size of a football field, surrounded by five porches where invalids lay, waiting for the water to be disturbed, presumably by an angel. Legend had it that the first person into the water after a disturbance would be healed. This one man had tried for 38 years, waiting for his chance, being disappointed time after time. Jesus asked him a simple question:

"Do you want to be made well?" (John 5:6).

It could be that a deeper question being asked here: "Do you really want to be healed, or are you comfortable in your misery?"

I'm not sure how to take the man's answer, either. Is he simply stating the facts, or is he making excuses?

"Sir, I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up; and while I am making my way, someone else steps in front of me." (John 5:7)

I don't know what was going on there, but I do know that sometimes we'd rather make excuses for why we aren't whole than to do what it takes to make things different. Sometimes we will live with the pain of a problem rather than to do what it takes to change it.

Sometimes we are like the old hound dog who was lying on the porch of an old-timer's cabin. The preacher came to visit, and he noticed that throughout the visit, the hound dog kept whimpering and whining and every so often would let out this long, mournful moan. Finally, the preacher asked the old-timer, "Man, what's wrong with your dog?"

The old man replied, "Where's he's lying there on the porch there's a nail sticking up, and it's probably gouging him in the side. I guess it's hurtin' him."

The preacher said, "Why doesn't he get up and move?"

The old-timer responded, "I guess it's not hurtin' him enough."

God is asking everyone of us the same question Jesus asked the lame man—"do you want to be made whole? Do you want to grow?"

2. YOU MUST BE WILLING TO PAY THE PRICE TO GROW

It's one thing to want something. It is something different to be willing to do what it takes for that thing to happen. The Scriptures teach us that spiritual growth is a joint venture between you and God.

Philippians 2:12-13 Therefore, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed me, not only in my presence but much more now in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

Paul says work out your own salvation, which means your role is important. He goes on to say, "For it is God who is at work in you." Spiritual growth is empowered by God; it's impossible without him.

Think about the differences between a motorboat and a sailboat. In a motorboat, some person is in control. That person starts the engine, controls the speed, and goes wherever he wants. Sailing is different. When someone is sailing, he is not passive. He has a role to play. He must hoist the sails and steer with the rudder, but he is completely dependent on the wind. If the wind doesn't blow, the boat won't go anywhere. In spiritual growth, God is the wind, but it's up to you to put up the sail if you are going to go forward.

Spiritual maturity comes as you discipline yourself to regularly involve yourself in a variety of spiritual experiences with God. You spend time doing your own personal Bible study, but that's not enough. You also have to have edifying, loving relationships with other believers and use your spiritual gifts for God's glory. As you do those things, lasting change will not suddenly appear. You have to do what you are supposed to do things day after day after day. The bottom line is that you must live your life in a state of surrender to God.

The Bible gives us stories of how some people really wanted to grow. They were people who were not content with knowing God on just a superficial or surface level. These were people who wanted to know God intimately. They hungered and thirsted after Him and were willing to do anything to be closer to Him. On the other hand, the Bible tells us about people who were very willing to know God on a superficial basis. They were people who straddled the spiritual fence. They may have sought God's blessings, but they weren't really interested in seeking God Himself. Both of those groups have existed throughout history. Which group do you belong to?