

A Closer Walk With God

Continuing to Grow as a Disciple of Jesus Christ

INTRODUCTION:

- I. Growth is normal and natural. It's expected.
 - A. If a newborn baby doesn't grow and develop that's clearly a sign that something is seriously wrong.
 1. We expect growth in all other areas of life. We not only expect a child to grow physically, we expect cognitive and social development.
 2. And, of course, we're always hearing talk all the time about economic growth and growth in private industry – a healthy sign of a prosperous economy.
 - B. But there is one kind of growth that is absolutely essential for everyone who is a disciple of Jesus Christ – spiritual growth.
 1. In our series of lessons on having "A Closer Walk With God" we need to take a close look at the need for spiritual growth in our lives.
 2. Just as we look for those healthy signs of growth and development in a newborn baby, we also need to be looking for those healthy

signs of spiritual growth and development in the life of every Christian.

3. To put it simply, if we want to have a closer walk with God, then we must grow spiritually as a disciple of Jesus Christ. How?
 - a. **1 Peter 2:1-3** – *Therefore, laying aside all malice, all deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and all evil speaking, 2 as newborn babes, desire the pure milk of the word, that you may grow thereby, 3 if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is gracious.*
 - b. **2 Peter 3:17b-18** – *. . .beware lest you also fall from your own steadfastness, being led away with the error of the wicked; 18 but grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.*
 - c. **Ephesians 4:14-15** – *. . .that we should no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, in the cunning craftiness of deceitful plotting, 15 but, speaking the truth in love, may grow up in all things into Him who is the head — Christ. . .*
 - d. **2 Thessalonians 1:3** - *We are bound to thank God always for you, brethren, as it is fitting, because your faith grows exceedingly, and the love of every one of you all abounds toward each other. . .*

- C. But spiritual growth must be well-rounded, balanced – there are many areas of our life where the Lord expects us to grow.
1. The Lord expects us to grow in knowledge, in zeal, in faith, in good works, and in developing a Christ-like character.
 2. It's not simply being full of knowledge – not simply being full of Bible facts and verses we can quote from memory – it must be where that knowledge has brought about positive and permanent changes in the life of every disciple of Jesus Christ.
 - a. Knowing the Word of God does us no good at all if we're not also living the Word of God in our lives every day.
 - b. If we can't put to use the Biblical knowledge we have, it really serves no useful purpose.
 - c. I personally knew a gospel preacher who was fluent in Greek and Hebrew, and who could preach some of the finest and most in-depth sermons I've ever heard – but he lived an immoral and ungodly life.
 3. A good example of this is seen in the ungodly lives of many in the Corinthian church.
 - a. **1 Corinthians 3:1-3** – *And I, brethren, could not speak to you as to spiritual people but as to carnal, as to babes in Christ. 2 I fed you with milk and not with solid food; for until now you were not able to receive it, and even now you are still not able;*

3 for you are still carnal. For where there are envy, strife, and divisions among you, are you not carnal and behaving like mere men?

b. **1 Corinthians 5:1-2** – *It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and such sexual immorality as is not even named among the Gentiles — that a man has his father's wife! 2 And you are puffed up, and have not rather mourned, that he who has done this deed might be taken away from among you.*

4. Many in the church at Corinth were still "*carnal*" – still living in keeping with their old fleshly nature – and it was manifesting itself in "*envy, strife and divisions*" as well as gross sexual immorality.
 - a. What could have possibly kept these Christians from becoming more Christ-like in their manner of living?
 - b. What were the factors that hindered their spiritual growth, as well as the spiritual growth of others we read about in the Scriptures?
- D. To answer those questions I want to do two things in this lesson.
 1. First, I want us to look at all the hindrances to spiritual growth.
 - a. And I can virtually guarantee that if you're not growing spiritually, we're going to touch on one or more of the reasons why you're not growing as you should.

2. And then, let's look at what we can do to overcome those hindrances.
 - a. Understanding what prevents us from growing spiritually doesn't do us much good unless we provide solutions.
 - b. We will talk about those as well.

Body:

- I. So, let's begin by first looking at some of the things that hinder our spiritual growth.
 - A. If we were to rate all the hindrances to spiritual growth, the one item that would be near the top of the list would be a lack of effort.
 1. Growing in Christ is not automatic. In fact, it's possible for someone to remain a "spiritual infant" for years after obeying the gospel.
 - a. **Hebrews 5:12-14** – *For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the first principles of the oracles of God; and you have come to need milk and not solid food. 13 For everyone who partakes only of milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, for he is a babe. 14 But solid food belongs to those who are of full age, that is, those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil.*

2. The problem with these Hebrew Christians was simple.
 - a. Their lack of spiritual growth was a direct result of their spiritual laziness – they were plagued with indifference and lethargy.
 - b. Spiritual growth – growing in every area of our lives as Christians – requires a dedicated effort.
 - c. But those who are spiritually lazy will simply follow the path of least resistance.

- B. Another leading factor in hindering spiritual growth is discouragement.
 1. Over the decades I've been preaching, I've seen so many start out in their walk with Christ determined to set the world on fire.
 - a. Unfortunately, I've also seen many of those same people become discouraged for various reasons and simply quit.
 2. Many things lead to discouragement in the life of a new Christian.
 - a. Sometimes it's directly related to problems within the church itself – such as strife and division.
 - b. Other times it's the result of personal problems – such as problems with family or friends, or perhaps even financial problems.
 - c. And sometimes their discouragement comes when they failed to get the encouragement they needed from others – from their brothers and sisters in Christ.

3. Sadly, the end result for many of these discouraged saints is to simply drift away from the Lord.
 - a. **Hebrews 2:1-3** – *Therefore we must give the more earnest heed to the things we have heard, lest we drift away. 2 For if the word spoken through angels proved steadfast, and every transgression and disobedience received a just reward, 3 how shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation, which at the first began to be spoken by the Lord, and was confirmed to us by those who heard Him. . .*
- C. Another factor in hindering spiritual growth is atrophy.
 1. One of the lessons I'm learning as one who suffers from severe osteoarthritis is that staying active actually helps reduce joint stiffness and pain.
 - a. It's very easy to remain as immobile as possible – because if I don't move, I don't hurt.
 - b. The problem with that approach to osteoarthritis is that a lack of movement results in atrophy – where the muscles and tendons simply lose their strength.
 - c. The end result is the inability to walk or stand at all.
 2. In the spiritual sense, we can experience spiritual atrophy through disuse.

- a. A disciple of Christ who doesn't use their talents and abilities will eventually lose them all.
3. This is the lesson the "one talent" man failed to learn until it was too late:
 - a. **Matthew 25:24-29** – *"Then he who had received the one talent came and said, 'Lord, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you have not sown, and gathering where you have not scattered seed. 25 And I was afraid, and went and hid your talent in the ground. Look, there you have what is yours.' 26 But his lord answered and said to him, 'You wicked and lazy servant, you knew that I reap where I have not sown, and gather where I have not scattered seed. 27 So you ought to have deposited my money with the bankers, and at my coming I would have received back my own with interest. 28 So take the talent from him, and give it to him who has ten talents. 29 For to everyone who has, more will be given, and he will have abundance; but from him who does not have, even what he has will be taken away.'"*
 4. This is why I encourage everyone to do everything they can to use the spiritual talents God has given you – whether teaching a Bible class, preaching, waiting on the Lord's table, leading in prayer,

leading singing, making announcements, reading Scripture, or serving others in this church in any number of ways.

a. If you don't use it, you will lose it.

D. We could talk about many other hindrances to spiritual growth, but one hindrance that is at the top of the list in the lives of so many Christians today is time.

1. We cram so many things into our lives, and fill almost every minute of our spare time with so many activities, that we simply crowd out time we could be spending with the Lord.

a. This hindrance to spiritual growth is so insidious – so subtle and dangerous – because it's not evil or sinful to fill our lives with activities.

b. Not until we have spent all our time doing things we consider important, or even fun, and suddenly realize we have given little or no time for the Lord.

c. We relegate the Lord to some small corner of our lives, or reduce the time we spend in spiritual growth and development to a few hours a week when we come to Bible class and worship – assuming we come to Bible class prepared, and come to worship regularly.

2. If I were to list all the things that crowd out the Lord and spiritual growth, the list would include:

- a. Working as many hours as we can to make as much money as we can, or sometimes by even taking on a second job so that there is no time for the Lord.
 - b. Becoming so preoccupied with housekeeping and children, or family, that we have little or no time for anything else.
 - c. Filling our schedule with school activities, or after-school activities, or summer activities so that we have little or no time for the Lord.
3. Jesus talked about this very thing in His Parable of the Sower.
- a. **Mark 4:18-19** – *Now these are the ones sown among thorns; they are the ones who hear the word, 19 and the cares of this world, the deceitfulness of riches, and the desires for other things entering in choke the word, and it becomes unfruitful.*
 - b. How many of us have allowed the "*cares of this world, the deceitfulness of riches, and the desires for others things*" to "*choke the word,*" and make us "*unfruitful?*"
4. If Satan can't get us to sin overtly, the very least he will do is to get us so involved in things of this world that we have little or no time for the Lord, and no time to grow and develop spiritually.
5. And when he does, he wins.

II. So what can we do to overcome these, and other, hindrances to spiritual growth and development?

A. Become more active in using your talents for the benefit of this congregation.

1. There is something for everyone to do – all you have to do is simply ask.

a. There is a constant need for men and women to teach Bible classes on Sunday mornings and Wednesday evenings.

b. I would like to see more of the men of this congregation volunteer to preach on the next-to-the-last Sunday evening of the month.

2. But there are other opportunities to use your talents that really requires nothing more than a little of your time.

a. Now that Spring is here and Summer is on its way, there will be more opportunities to hand out fliers and door hangers.

b. In the past we had dozens of members helping canvass neighborhoods on a given Saturday.

c. But now, the number has dropped to two or three – and occasionally only Bill Hash goes out by himself to hang door hangers.

- d. He tries to recruit others, and sometimes others go with him.
But when he can't get someone to help, he goes out by himself.
3. Even something that may seem very menial can go a long way to bring joy to those who are doing their service to please God.
- a. The psalmist said: **Psalms 84:10** – *For a day in Your courts is better than a thousand. I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than dwell in the tents of wickedness.*
 - b. Jesus taught the principle of humble service to His disciples: **John 13:12-17** – *So when He had washed their feet, taken His garments, and sat down again, He said to them, "Do you know what I have done to you? 13 You call Me Teacher and Lord, and you say well, for so I am. 14 If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. 15 For I have given you an example, that you should do as I have done to you. 16 Most assuredly, I say to you, a servant is not greater than his master; nor is he who is sent greater than he who sent him. 17 If you know these things, blessed [happy] are you if you do them.*

4. There are all kinds of things you can do.
 - a. Greet visitors and newcomers – invite them to lunch after services and get to know them better.
 - b. Send follow-up letters to all those who visit encouraging them to visit again.
 - c. Call those who are sick, or who have been missing for a while to see if everything is okay – perhaps they need help.
 - d. Offer to host a Bible study in your home.
 5. I'm sure you could think of a number of things you could do to help this congregation, and to help reach the lost – all you need to do is use some of your time and talents.
 - a. One of the quickest ways to overcome hindrances that prevent us from growing and maturing spiritually is to get up and do something – anything.
 - b. If we have Isaiah's attitude of "*Here am I! Send me!*" (Isaiah 6:8), we won't be plagued with so many hindrances.
- B. Begin your own program of regular private devotions.
1. Spend time every day alone with God in prayer and in Bible reading.
 - a. I hear people talk all the time about wanting to study their Bibles more, and a lot of lessons have been taught on that subject in Bible classes and from the pulpit.

- b. But no one can make you start spending more time with God in prayer and Bible study than you.
 - c. Hopefully, you're already spending at least some time in prayer. Now all you need to do is simply add spending more time in the Word.
2. Paul told Timothy: **1 Timothy 4:13** - *Till I come, give attention to reading. . .*
- a. If Timothy needed to spend time reading the Word of God what about us?
3. The easiest way to start is by simply start reading your Bible every day – start with the New Testament – one chapter a day.
- a. There are 270 chapters in the New Testament, and the longest would take you up to 20 minutes to read in a slow conversational style. You could complete the entire New Testament in less than 9 months.
 - b. Just imagine how much more you would know if you simply read your Bible every day – one chapter a day – no more, and no less.
4. If you ever expect to grow spiritually and grow in your understanding of God's Word, you must spend time in God's Word.

- C. Participate in an informal Bible study group.
1. Meeting weekly with other Christians is absolutely essential to spiritual growth and development.
 2. But small-group studies in someone's home is a much better way to really get to know others in this congregation – as well as grow and mature even more as a disciple of Jesus Christ.
 - a. So consider opening your home to one of these studies, or attending a study in the home of someone else.
 - b. We have two really good series of studies on DVD: One is the 12 part series of "The Truth Project," and the other is the 6 part series of "Searching For Truth."
 - c. These studies provide a wonderful opportunity to not only grow closer to one another, but to also grow deeper in our understanding of God's Word.
 3. Remember, spiritual ignorance which comes from Biblical ignorance, lies at the root of every apostasy the church has suffered over the past two-thousand years.
 4. Therefore, we need to do as Paul told Timothy: **2 Timothy 2:15** – *Be diligent to present yourself approved to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth.*

D. Help lead someone to Christ.

1. You can either do this yourself by speaking to friends and family about the Lord, or you can do as Andrew did with his brother Simon Peter – you can bring someone to a teacher to be taught.
 - a. **John 1:40-42a** – *One of the two who heard John speak, and followed Him, was Andrew, Simon Peter's brother. 41 He first found his own brother Simon, and said to him, "We have found the Messiah" (which is translated, the Christ). 42 And he brought him to Jesus.*
2. You don't have to do the teaching – all you need to do is simply set up an opportunity for your friend and family member to meet with someone who can teach them.
 - a. We have several in this congregation who are capable of teaching those who are outside of Christ.
3. Or think about bringing them to a private Bible study in someone's home, or simply give them a "Searching For Truth" Bible study guide and DVD.
4. There is no better way to overcome spiritual lethargy and indifference than to lead someone to Christ – to know you've saved a soul from death and hidden a multitude of sins.

E. And above all, practice constant self-examination.

1. In fact, this is actually a command.

- a. **2 Corinthians 13:5-6** – *Examine yourselves as to whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves. Do you not know yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you? — unless indeed you are disqualified. 6 But I trust that you will know that we are not disqualified.*
 - b. How are we going to know if we are "*disqualified*" from receiving the crown of life when we die unless we examine ourselves to see whether we are "*in the faith.*"
2. Here's a very simple list of questions you can ask yourself right now.
- a. Do I have a better knowledge of the Bible today than I did a year ago?
 - b. Am I as interested in Jesus Christ today as when I was baptized?
 - c. Have I helped someone else to become a Christian?
 - d. Am I enjoying life as a child of God?
 - e. Am I becoming more like Christ?
 - f. Do I set a good example for others – especially for other Christians?
 - g. Am I growing in such activities as Bible study, prayer, worship?

- h. Am I attending Bible classes and worship every opportunity I have?
3. Self-examination is not an easy process, but it's impossible to have true spiritual growth without it.

CONCLUSION:

- I. Thus far in this series of lessons on "A Closer Walk with God" we've talked about what it means to be a disciple of Christ, and the blessings and responsibilities that go along with it.
 - A. But if we're not growing and maturing as a disciple, something is seriously wrong.
 - 1. Maybe we need to go back and ask if we were truly converted to Jesus Christ in the first place.
 - a. When we were baptized into Christ, did we truly come to Him in complete faith and obedience, willing to forsake all and follow Him no matter what the consequences?
 - b. If not, then perhaps we need to ensure our conversion to Jesus Christ was what the Lord expects it to be.
 - 2. Or maybe it's simply a matter of having lost ground spiritually since the time when we first obeyed the gospel.

- a. Have we noticed that we are less interested in spiritual things, and spending less time with the Lord in prayer, Bible reading and study, and especially in worship?
- c. If so, then we need to change while there is still a glimmer of guilt remaining – before we get to the point where, as Paul says, we become "*past feeling*" (**cf. Ephesians 4:19**).