

Spiritual Growth

As believers, we must understand that God wants us to continuously grow closer to Him and enjoy a personal relationship with Him throughout our lives. This is called spiritual growth. God's Word makes it abundantly clear that if we are to be the kind of Christians God wants us to be, then we need to continuously grow in our relationship with the Lord. The apostle Peter exhorts us to "grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ" (II Peter 3:18). Peter contrasts this growth with "being led away with the error of the wicked" and falling from our own steadfastness (II Peter 3:17). It has been said that every believer is either growing closer to God or wandering father away from Him. We are never stagnant or neutral in the Christian life. If we are failing to grow spiritually, then we are actually regressing spiritually.

We find the need for spiritual growth, the requirements for spiritual growth and the goal of spiritual growth enunciated in the Word of God. Just as our physical bodies need nourishment in order to grow and prosper, our spiritual inner-man also needs to be nourished with the Word of God in order for us to grow and prosper in our spiritual lives and in our walk with God. Charles Haddon Spurgeon, the great English preacher, once said, "The moment the Lord Jesus Christ saves a soul He gives that soul strength for its appointed service." The question we must ask ourselves is this: Are we utilizing the strength God has given us to grow spiritually and fulfill God's will? We must purpose to grow in the Lord each day, to become stronger in faith and in the knowledge of God, in order to fulfill our reasonable service to our Master. Spiritual growth is a lifelong process (Phil 3:10-15), and we must purpose to persistently and consistently "press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus."

I. The Need for Spiritual Growth

- a. First, we must grow spiritually because God tells us to do so. Ephesians 4:17-24 commands us to "put off" the old man, to "put on" the new man and to be "renewed" in the spirit of our mind. We must grow from being an unlearned unbeliever who walks according to the ways of the world into a mature believer who abides in fellowship with Christ through obedience to His Word. At the beginning of our Christian life, we should desire the "milk" of God's Word, that is, we must learn the basic principles of Christian living (I Cor 3:2; I Pet 2:2). As we grow, we can then feed upon the "meat" of the Word and better exercise the spirit of discernment (Heb 5:14).
- b. Second, we need to grow spiritually because we possess a natural propensity to sin, and if our sin is left unchecked, we will only wander farther away from a proper relationship with our Saviour (Eph 4:14,17). Spiritual growth is a lifetime endeavor. It is a daily battle. No believer can ever reach the place in his life where he can claim to have completely matured into the image of Christ. If the apostle Paul battled against the world, the flesh and the devil and needed to grow spiritually, we certainly need to do so as well (Rom 7:17-18). Throughout the history of the human race, man has wrestled with this area of spiritual growth because man is naturally a slave to sin. Our sin nature makes spiritual growth an ongoing struggle. Yet we must never give up. We need to continually grow because, like Paul, we are in a daily battle with the world, the flesh and the devil. God's Word teaches us that our inward man should be renewed daily (II Cor 4:16) and should never cease from growing into the image of our Saviour (Col 3:10).

II. The Requirements for Spiritual Growth

a. Be willing and take action

- i. In order to grow spiritually, we first must be willing to grow and to glorify God as we yield ourselves to the indwelling Holy Spirit. In Ephesians 4:23, Paul commands us to "be renewed." He did not say renewal is a natural process. Rather, it is an act of the will, and we must willingly grow and yield ourselves to God's leading.
- ii. Yet, a willingness to grow spiritually is not enough. We must take one step further and actually do it! To passively sit back and contemplate the need for spiritual growth, to be willing to grow or even to purpose to grow is not enough. While it is certainly difficult to grow at times, we must be willing to be spiritually renewed to the point of action. Growth and spiritual maturity can come to pass through God's enabling (Phil 2:13; 4:13).

b. Put off the old man

- i. In Ephesians 4:22, God's Word commands us to "put off" the "old man." The "old man" comprises the habits and actions of our old sinful nature to which we are naturally accustomed. Every individual possesses an old nature, a sin nature, described by God as "corrupt." We must not allow the old man to dominate our lives. Man's sin nature is fueled by lust, that is, strong desires that motivate us to act in a way that is displeasing to God.
- ii. To "put off" the old man means to unclothe ourselves of that which is motivated by our old, sinful nature. Examples of those things which we are to "put off" including lying, wrathful anger, stealing, corrupt communication, bitterness, malice, evil speaking, fornication, covetousness and blasphemy (Col 3:5-9). Even as believers, we will be tempted to follow the feelings of our old sin nature than the will of God as prescribed in His Word. Nevertheless, we must "put off," or reject, that which we know is sin.

c. Put on the new man.

- i. Not only must we “put off,” or unclothe ourselves, of the “old man,” but we must replace our clothing with something else – the “new man.” In Ephesians 4:24, God’s Word commands us to “put on” the “new man.” The “new man” is our new nature obtained at the new birth, our salvation. To “put on” the new man is to clothe ourselves with new thinking, habits, motives and actions that were completely foreign to us prior to our salvation.
- ii. God’s Word again gives us specific examples of that which we are to “put on.” Such examples include righteousness, truth, holiness, forgiveness, kindness, meekness, patience, love, peace and thankfulness (Col 3:10-15). As believers, our lifestyles and activities should be noticeably different than those we possessed prior to our salvation.

d. Renew your thinking

- i. In Ephesians 4:23, God’s Word commands us to “be renewed in the spirit of your mind.” Renewed thinking is the key to spiritual growth. The way in which we “put off” and “put on” is accomplished only through renewed thinking. Why? Because renewed thinking leads to renewed habits and actions. When we change the way we think, we will change the way we live and act.
- ii. The word renewed means “new again.” To renew our thinking involves a complete renovation of our thought life; it does not mean to simply combine the ideas and philosophies of the world with those of Christ and His Word. Our entire mind must be centered upon the Word of God and focused upon honoring and glorifying our Saviour rather than being conformed to the world system.
- iii. Romans 12:2 reminds us that we can only be changed and grow spiritually by the “renewing” of our mind. This verse states, “And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God.” The only way that we can honor God and fulfill His will is to grow and change spiritually, and such growth and change only results from renewed thinking which leads to Godly habits and actions.

e. Yield your body to God

- i. In order to grow spiritually, we must yield our bodies to God. Romans 6:11-13 commands us to refrain from yielding our bodies as “instruments of unrighteousness unto sin,” but commands us to “yield (ourselves) unto God, as those that are alive from the dead, and (our) members as instruments of righteousness unto God.”
- ii. To yield our bodies “as instruments of righteousness unto God” involves refusing to allow sin to reign in our bodies (Rom 6:11-13). We grow spiritually when we utilize the strength and power of God to purge sin from our lives – sin does not have to dominate us (Rom 6:14)! As Christians, we must ask the Lord to take complete control of our lives and give us the strength to do those things that honor and please Him.

f. The Goal of Spiritual Growth

- i. As Christians, or “followers of Christ,” our goal is to be like our Saviour, Jesus Christ. How do we know how to be like Christ when we cannot physically see Him? By studying His Word to us, for everything we know about Jesus Christ and everything we know about His requirements for righteous, Christian living is contained in the pages of His Holy Word. From the Bible we can know the mind of Christ and how to have this same mind as our own (Phil 2:4-5).
- ii. God’s Word reveals to us that we are to be spiritually growing from the time we are saved until the day we are with Christ (Eph 4:13, Rom 8:28-29). This spiritual growth involves putting on the mind of Christ. How can we know the mind of Christ? First, we must be His children through faith alone in His perfect sacrifice and bodily resurrection. Second, we must be yielded to Christ as obedient children. Third, we must study the written Word, the Bible, in order to know the mind of the living Word, Jesus Christ (John 1:1; 14). To be “Christ-like” involves our thoughts, motives and actions.

g. To Honor And Glorify God

- i. In Ephesians 3:14-21, Paul introduces us to the way in which we glorify God- by growing spiritually and changing daily as we are “strengthened with might by His Spirit in the inner man” (vs. 16). Paul concludes this third chapter by stating that the glorification of God is to be paramount in the life of the believer (vs. 21) and continues in chapter four by telling us how we can praise God – by growing spiritually!
- ii. If our goal in life is to glorify God, and it should be, then we have no choice but to be growing and changing daily into men and women who are yielded to Christ, who are putting off the lusts of the flesh and putting on the mind of Christ.

Study Questions:

1. According to II Peter 3:18, in what two areas is the believer to grow?
2. In what practical ways can we grow in grace and in the knowledge of Jesus Christ?
3. Ephesians 4:22-32 and Colossians 3:1-17 are the key passages in Scripture detailing how we grow spiritually. According to these passages, we grow by putting off the old man and putting on the new man as we renew our minds. Answer the following questions from these verses:

What deeds of the flesh are we as believers to “put off”?

What is the key to “putting off” and “putting on” (Eph 4:23)?

4. According to this lesson, what are the two goals of spiritual growth? Use Scriptures to support your answer.
5. Paul emphasizes the lifelong process of spiritual growth in Phil 3:10-15. In what way does Paul describe spiritual growth in verses 12-14?
6. In order to achieve spiritual growth, what must we put to death and to whom must we yield our bodies according to Romans 6:11-13?