

## Following Jesus Together

Grow

Colossians 1:19-22, 28

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*"For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross. And you, who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him...Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ." (Colossians 1:19–22, 28)*

I'm thinking a lot about growth these days, both personally and pastorally. This weekend we launched Jeremiah to college. As you can imagine, it was an emotional rollercoaster. And as those of you who have walked through this season know, the drive home presents some great moments for reflection.

At one level, there is great joy. You know that "growing up" is what kids are supposed to do. As I've taught parenting and marriage classes, I've often said, "You train children so that they can leave." And that is true and right. But there's another side of the coin too.

There is, at least for me, a tendency to look back and ask, "Did I do enough? Did I create an environment where spiritual maturity could happen?" Now this certainly could produce some unhealthy "naval-gazing," so I need to be careful to not overly analyzing everything. But it does serve a healthy purpose: to consider the environment of growth in our home. I'm not finished raising children, and I'm told that the next season comes faster than you imagine, so this question is not going away any time soon. It just has more of a feminine application. It is good to ponder.

As I think back, there are a number of "do-overs" that I'd like. We've not been perfect parents. We've made big mistakes. I'm very grateful for God's grace despite our failures.

But I found one thing to be helpful and effective: we worked hard to be intentional. Sarah and I talked often about where we were headed, the spiritual needs in the lives of our kids, and what we could do to help shape them. Not everything worked as we thought it would. However, as I reflect, the one thing that made a big difference in any success or failures as parents was our intentionality.

Prayerfully thinking through our vision for their maturity and then determining how we were going to be God's conduit for grace in their lives was really, really important. I think that is one of the reasons spiritually passive fathers make me so nervous. It seems to me that a lack of intentionality in parenting has a consistently negative effect on the spiritual maturity of children. And I think the same applies to the church.

## **Intentional About Disciple-Making**

Are we talking about parenting today? No, we're not. However, although this is not a sermon on parenting, there are some significant parallels to making disciples and spiritual growth. In the same way that intentionality with parenting makes a big difference, it also has a significant impact on spiritual growth.

The culture in which we live is not neutral. Every human being enters the world as a sinner under the wrath of God. We are natural born sinners. Even after we come to faith in Jesus and turn from our sins, our hearts are not always inclined to do what is right. We have a spiritual enemy, the devil, who seeks to destroy us. There is a gravitational pull inside us and in the world toward heading in the wrong direction.

Last week we talked about our broken belonging and how it can be renewed through Christ. As I've watched the news and listened to the conversation in our culture, I've been so alarmed and so sad. I see the broken belonging everywhere. I've been troubled even with myself and how much my perception of everything, especially racial issues, is deeply affected by the background of where I've "belonged." I'm working hard to compassionately understand the various cultural issues, especially from our African-American brothers in Christ. I want to live and act in a way that fits with my belonging in Christ. But I need the Lord's help.

And every Sunday we bring all this brokenness and all these pressures with us. Just because we have a Bible, a place that we call church, and some program is no guarantee that disciple-making is going to happen. We have to be intentional.

If your children experienced the blessing of our Next Generations Ministry today, you need to know our aim is spiritual intentionality with them. The purpose of our children's ministry is to disciple your children, not just to provide child-care for them. As we start a new year of Children's Ministry, I hope that you appreciate the opportunity for children to be discipled, and I hope that you'll affirm the people who have helped you disciple your children today.

This month we are talking about three key words: BELONG, GROW, and MULTIPLY. We are attempting to help our entire church think about our personal discipleship level and how we help people in their discipleship. We want to help our church be a place where we can be intentional about making disciples.

After looking at the word BELONG last week, we now turn our attention to our vision for spiritual growth. What does it mean to GROW? How do we GROW? Why should we GROW? Those are some of the questions we'll try to answer today. We are going to explore these questions so that we can determine how to be more intentional with discipleship personally. Perhaps we can be more motivated by the Holy Spirit to press into spiritual growth so that we can help one another grow.

To do that, let's look at Colossians 1 and discover what we learn about spiritual growth.

## Four Aspects of Spiritual Growth

Since the concept of spiritual growth is too familiar and often too vague, let's see if we can put some handles on this.

### 1. The Source (vv. 19-20)

I want to begin by reminding you that spiritual growth is directly connected to Jesus. From the outset of our learning, I want to help you orient your thinking and your affections in the right direction. Spiritual growth is divinely rooted in a person – the son of God, Jesus Christ. Spiritual growth happens “in Him” and “through Him.”

Helping people to see and embrace this was one of Paul's main goals in writing the book of Colossians. The church there was starting to take its focus off Jesus. This was leading them to embrace a vision or definition of spiritual maturity which was not Christ-centered. Paul addresses this problem in Colossians 2:8-9.

*“See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ. For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily,”* (Colossians 2:8–9, ESV)

Notice the language “in him the whole fullness of deity dwells . . .” in verse 9. Paul was pointing them away from their misunderstanding of spirituality and directing them toward Christ *because* He is the fullness of deity. Jesus is the full expression of God's glory on earth. There is nothing more God-like than Him. He was God. He is God.

Now this language, “in him the whole fullness of deity,” is used correctively in 2:8-9, but it first appears in 1:19 as a summary of the heart of the Christian faith. The passage says “for in him all the fullness God was pleased to dwell” (1:19). Again, there's nothing more God-like than Jesus. He was God. He is God. He is the fullness of deity. You need not look anywhere else to discover what godliness looks like. Jesus is the full expression of God's glory. He's the source of everything that we know about God's glory because He is fully God.

But there's more. The centerpiece of God's redemptive plan is the reconciliation between God and mankind through Jesus. He's not just the source of our understanding of God; He's also the source of redemption and peace with God.

Notice the Jesus-centeredness of verse 20 with the phrases “**through him** to reconcile **to himself** . . . making peace by the blood **of his cross**.” The gospel – the saving of sinful human beings by the death and life of Jesus – only happen through Christ. Grace comes through Him. Grace is the means of coming to Him. And grace is not effective without Him.

We don't have time to unpack this even further. There's much more that could be said. In fact, the entire New Testament unfolds this theme of the centrality of Jesus. But here's my question: Do you think about spiritual growth in a Jesus-centered way? By that I mean do you really understand that any kind of spiritual transformation is “from him, through him and to him”? (Rom. 11:36).

As we think about spiritual growth, where does your mind go? Where does your heart go? What's your first step? Do you think in terms of Bible knowledge or church program involvement? Do you think about spiritual growth as what a person doesn't do? Perhaps spiritual growth for you is about sinning less. While all of those things are true at one level, they are not the complete picture.

When we think about spiritual growth, it must be Jesus-centered – as the beginning, the means, and the goal. Jesus is how spiritual growth is possible. Jesus is the means of spiritual growth. Jesus is the goal of spiritual growth. Jesus is the source of everything related to spiritual growth.

If spiritual growth is creating something in you that is disconnected from a love and focus on Jesus, something is wrong. That's why our mission statement is "igniting a passion to follow Jesus." This is similar to how we should think about marriage. It would be very odd if I constantly talked about the institution of marriage, the benefits of marriage, the ingredients of making a good marriage, and the commitment of marriage at the neglect of talking about my wife. The source and substance of my joy in marriage is Sarah – a person. In the same way, Jesus is the source and substance of our joy when it comes to spiritual growth.

## 2. The Plan (vv. 21-22)

The second aspect of spiritual growth is connected to the divine plan that is at work through Jesus. The scriptures tell us that our individual growth – right now – is part of a redemptive intentionality that God is accomplishing. In other words, our spiritual growth is leading somewhere. What were we saved from? What are we saved to? Where is it heading?

Verse 21 picks up a theme that we heard last week regarding what we were saved from. Paul uses three phrases that summarize the nature of the broken human condition. There is a reason why we need to be saved:

- **Alienated** – our sinful motives and actions have caused a spiritual separation between us and God. It is the same Greek word that was used in Ephesians 2:12, which we looked at last week.
- **Hostile in mind** – this is to think like an enemy or to hate someone. In our natural condition, we think anti-God thoughts. We don't want His rules, His reign, or His evaluation of our lives.
- **Doing evil deeds** – our lost condition is not theoretical. We are guilty of actions that violate God's law. We do wrong things.

The picture here is pretty bleak. Paul identifies that our lost condition has affected the entire person. Our position, our thinking, and our actions are the arenas in which our lost status is obvious.

Now the solution to the problem is what we find in verse 22 – "reconciled in his body of flesh by his death . . ." The purpose of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus was to remedy this damnable condition characterized by wrong actions, wrong thinking, and wrong belonging.

But it is the second half of verse 22 that we need to really understand for the purposes of our time today: ". . . in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him . . ." This is a very important statement. I hope that when you see statements like "in order that" in the Bible, you

make the connection to purpose. This phrase points to three things that God is doing in salvation. This is where spiritual growth is headed:

- **Holy** – to make a person completely righteous, to share the central quality of godliness
- **Blameless** – to be free from every fault, to have a standing of complete righteousness
- **Above reproach** – to be free from every accusation, without any guilt

This is the aim and purpose of redemption. The goal is to present you before God with a righteousness that is not your own but that belongs to Jesus. And the miracle of this moment is the contrast between your past and what God, through Christ, has made you to be.

How does this future connect to our present spiritual growth? Well, verse 23 says “if you continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel . . .” Now Paul is not saying our future spiritual position is created by this conditional statement. He’s not saying that your position of holiness, blamelessness, or being above reproach is something that you created or accomplished.

Rather, he’s saying the plan of redemption creates a tangible and real effect in the space between your conversion and your final standing before God. The plan of God is to make you righteous – to be holy, blameless, and above reproach – with tangible effects right now.

In other words, spiritual growth for a believer is central to God’s plan. God is on a mission to make you righteous – both positionally and practically. Do you know that’s the plan? Do you know that the plan is more than just knowing where you are going to “go” when you die? Do you love God’s plan to make you righteous? Are you working with God’s plan in mind in your life?

### **3. The Means (v 28a)**

The third aspect of spiritual growth highlights the means. How is this accomplished? What did Paul do in order to see spiritual growth take place in his ministry? Where did he point people? Where do we need to point people?

Verses 27-28 clearly answer these questions. If the essence of the gospel is “Christ in you, the hope of glory,” then talking about Jesus must be central in our message and methods. Spiritual growth does not happen without a focus on Jesus. It is the means to the end of spiritual growth.

Central to this means is proclamation about Jesus. The word “proclaim” means to make known, to spread, and to announce. Spiritual growth happens as this message about Jesus is spread and declared.

At one level, this is about evangelism, as the gospel is shared with people who have never heard the message before. But at another level, the proclamation of this message is also for believers, as in Romans 1:15, when Paul desires to return to the church at Rome and preach the gospel to them.

Spiritual growth happens as we embrace and rehearse the gospel of Jesus Christ. We grow not only as we understand the content of the gospel, but also through its implications in our lives. We learn the application of beholding the glory of the Lord as we are transformed into the same image from one

degree of glory to another (2 Cor. 3:18). We need to proclaim Him – the work of Jesus and the message of Jesus.

Now Colossians 1:28 provides three additional qualifiers for this proclamation of Christ. 1) It is to be done with everyone, 2) It involves warning people, and 3) it involves teaching people.

We are to warn people about the dangers of trying to pursue spirituality apart from the Good News found in Jesus. We have to warn them about a coming judgment – that Jesus is coming back, and we'll all have to stand before Him. That was Peter's warning at Pentecost in Acts 2:36. The man they crucified is alive, and He's both Lord and Christ.

But the warning also involves the real danger of believing and living in another gospel. Paul admonished the believers in the book of Galatians to not believe even an angel if he preached something other than Jesus (Gal. 1:8). We can start to believe the lies that are from the devil or from within our own hearts. We can start to believe the accusations that are hurled at us. We can begin to believe that our spirituality depends on us. We can trust what we are doing instead of what Jesus is doing. We can begin to trust a program, a particular book, a counseling strategy, or a philosophy of ministry. In short, we can start to live on performance, not promise. We need to be warned about trusting in Christ.

Along with that warning, we also need to teach people, with wisdom, what it means to be in Christ. We need to help them know:

- How to understand the depth of our union with Christ, how we are dead to sin and alive in Him
- How to trust Christ, not just for the initial forgiveness of our sins but for our everyday lives
- How to apply the gospel to our failures, resting in the atoning work of Jesus
- How to abide in Christ, because apart from Him we can do nothing
- How to do this through the various seasons of life that we walk through

We have to apply the gospel when our children and teens are disobedient, question their faith, or fall to peer pressure. We need to apply the gospel to college students as they live as exiles. We need to apply the gospel to singles, to marriage, to sexuality, to our careers, to retirement, and to dying. Through every season of life, we need to proclaim Christ.

Spiritual growth only happens as we proclaim the beauty of Christ. We can't forget the gospel. It is the means to all growth. And this needs to happen, not just individually, but also in groups. Jeff Vanderstelt, author of *Gospel Fluency*, encourages small group leaders to think about four questions to help their members weave the gospel into the challenges that are shared:

- 1) How does the gospel bring good news to this situation?
- 2) What about the gospel do we need to hear right now?
- 3) What about the gospel have we forgotten or failed to believe?

4) How is Jesus better than what we have or what we want?<sup>1</sup>

As you help one another grow, those questions could be very helpful. Or maybe they are helpful to your soul right now. While you are a believer in Jesus, maybe there are some areas where you have lived this week as if you've forgotten the gospel.

Can I just remind all of us that Jesus and the Gospel are the means by which spiritual growth happen? We have to proclaim Him, warning and teaching everyone.

#### **4. The Purpose (v. 28)**

We come finally to the end and the goal of where spiritual growth leads. Paul says, "that we may present everyone mature in Christ." That's it! This is what spiritual growth looks like. Progressively, over time, we are growing more and more into the likeness of Jesus.

The word "mature" means to be developed, completed, or perfected. It has the idea of pushing away from the things that don't look like Jesus and toward the things that make us like Him. Now there will come a day, called glorification, when this process is finished, and we will be completely and totally "perfected." But for now, we are to strive toward helping one another, in greater and greater degrees, exhibit the life of Christ.

What does this maturity in Christ look like?

- Putting to death the sinful deeds of the body (Rom. 8:13)
- Walking in the Spirit (Gal. 5:16)
- Defeating the works of the flesh – sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, covetousness, anger, wrath, malice, slander, obscene talk, and lying (Col. 3:5-9)
- Embracing the fruit of the Spirit – love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Gal. 5:22-23)
- Being steadfast under trial, allowing God to work out His plan in our lives (James 1:4)
- Working to maintain the unity of the body of Christ because a unified people are a mature people (Eph. 4:13)
- Joyfully focusing on the future, not trusting in our prior spiritual life (Phil. 3:15)

Now I could go on with a number of other things, and I'm sure that you could as well. But the point is simply that over time, we look more and more like Jesus in real and practical ways. And this is the goal of the church in everything it does. Our mission is to help you follow Jesus. We want to be intentional in our efforts to help you become like Jesus.

So, let me ask you three questions at the end of this sermon:

- 1) Do you have a personal relationship with Jesus? Have you trusted Jesus for the forgiveness of your sins? Are you a Christian?

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<sup>1</sup> Jeff Vanderstelt, *Gospel Fluency – Speaking the Truth of Jesus into the Everyday Stuff of Life*, (Wheaton: Crossway, 2017) 144.

- 2) How would you describe your spiritual growth right now? Are you struggling? Are you thriving? Are you faking it? Are you growing?
- 3) What would it take for you to grow even more in the next six months? What tangible step do you need to take today in order to facilitate greater spiritual growth in your life?

The one action step that we are going to take right now is to close our service by celebrating the Lord's table. In celebrating this moment, we not only rehearse the gospel and remind ourselves about our union with Christ, but we also renew our commitment to grow.

So, let's join together around the table and use these elements to seek greater maturity in our church and in our lives.

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