

# *To Grow or Not to Grow*

John Birk - March 22, 2015

## **Introduction**

Years ago, I was having a conversation about the process of spiritual growth, with an Elder Board member of the church we were attending at the time. At a point of sobering transparency, he said something that I still remember, "the surprise to me, he said, has been to find out that spiritual growth is not automatic. I really thought that after all these years as a Christian, by now I would have become more mature in my faith and life." It struck me that between the lines he was saying, "looking back, I wish I had been more intentional and active in developing a deeper relationship and closer walk with God through the course of my life."

I knew I was hearing something very personal and important to learn from. It underscored in my mind that my spiritual growth in Christ was not going to just happen with the passage of time - it would have to be purposefully and persistently pursued. Which presented a choice - to grow or not to grow.

I wish I could tell you that I locked in the right choice then and there, and consistently grew in my relationship with God from then on - I did not. But I can say without question, that in those periods of my life when I have chosen to be more purposeful, active, and consistent in building my relationship with God, I have grown in faith, love, peace and joy.

We all have a choice virtually every day - to grow or not to grow in our relationship with God in Christ.

## **I. But just what are we growing toward?**

**A.** We know in general terms that God's desire for each of us is to be conformed to Christ.

- Concerned that the new believers were being misled by false teachers, in Galatians 4, Paul wrote:

My dear children, for whom I am again in the pains of childbirth until Christ is formed in you....(Gal. 4:19)

The goal is to grow more and more in likeness to the mind, heart and character of our Savior

- But what does that look like in more concrete terms? Here's one definition...
- B.** To become a child of God who lives in ready, willing, and ongoing obedience to Jesus, from a mind and heart of resilient faith and supreme love, grounded in God's Word, inspired by God's Spirit, and built up by God's people.
- We could spend the rest of the morning unpacking that definition of spiritual maturity, but I just want to highlight a few keys that I hope will drive it home.

- “Child of God” simply emphasizes our absolute humble dependence on Him. No matter how intimate our friendship with God becomes or how spiritually mature we grow, He will always be the infinite sovereign Creator-Father, and we will always be his finite, dependent creature-children! Growing doesn’t reduce our awe and wonder, it expands it!
- “Ready, willing, and ongoing obedience to Christ” is the tangible external dimension of spiritual maturity, the outer actions and behaviors of love, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, responsibility, dependability, fruitfulness, service, witness, and so on – in essence, behaving like Jesus!
- “Mind and heart of resilient faith and supreme love” is the intangible internal dimension of spiritual maturity, the inner quality of mind, heart, motives, and desires – reflecting the character of Jesus himself.
- “Grounded in God’s Word, inspired by God’s Spirit, and built up by God’s people” identifies the primary instruments of God’s grace through which he brings about our growth as we actively participate.
  - Our renewed focus on small groups is precisely to help us better build up one another in fellowship, learning, care, and support.
  - I’m very thankful for a group of leaders who gladly stepped up to help us jump-start a set of groups this spring, and I’m excited to share that there are six new groups available to sign-up for this morning. Topics range from heaven, to marriage, to parenting, to the basics of Christianity. Details and sign-ups will be available after the service. Obviously, space is limited, so if you’re wanting to grow together with others, don’t delay!
  - Also, I want to let you know there is a fellowship and support group for veteran’s being put together by Wayne Stiles, Roy Gwillim, and Aaron Ahearn, that is going to provide a great opportunity for vets to connect with each other and grow in Christ. Watch for an announcement soon.
  - Back to our theme of spiritual growth...
- How do we become a child of God who lives in ready, willing, and ongoing obedience to Jesus, from a mind and heart of resilient faith and supreme love, grounded in God’s Word, inspired by God’s Spirit, and built up by God’s people? What’s our role in the process?

## **II. We must choose to actively pursue: knowing, believing, loving and obeying our Savior**

These are certainly not the only aspects of our relationship with God, but I see them as the minimum necessary stepping stones of spiritual life that pave the upward path of spiritual growth. Let’s look at each one and see how they work together to fuel our progress.

## A. Knowing God

- The path of spiritual life and growth starts here and always continues here, because growing in our knowledge, appreciation, enjoyment, and worship of God is the highest pursuit of all, for this life and the next!
- Our very Christian life begins with knowing God through his divine Son, Jesus Christ, and coming to know and accept our desperate need for his mercy, and embrace his forgiving grace.
- And our spiritual growth continues as we choose to learn and know more & more about God in all the attributes and expressions of his being, as Almighty Creator, Loving Father, Gracious Savior, Omnipresent Eternal Spirit, Indwelling Holy Spirit, King of Kings, Lord of Lords, the Beginning and the End, and on and on our learning of him will go!
- But there is one essential priority and path to knowing God that I want to land on for a minute - knowing Jesus. He is the person of God who most fully and perfectly shows and teaches who God is and what he's like.
  - The writer of Hebrews declared, "In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, <sup>2</sup> but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe. <sup>3</sup> The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being...." (Heb 1:1-3)
  - Jesus said, "Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father" (John 14:9).
- Spiritual growth requires an ever-growing knowledge of God - his majesty, wisdom, perfection and power - his person, character, love and grace - his sovereignty, authority, purpose and will. And Jesus is our primary source! Above all, we must come to know Jesus. We must sit at the feet of the Master; we must learn from the divine Rabbi himself.

That brings us to the next essential element of spiritual growth...

## B. Believing God

- The more we know the heart, character, wisdom and ways of Jesus, the more we're drawn to believe him and believe in him - who he is, what he's done, what he says, what he's doing, what he's planning, and what's to come.
- In the cycle of growth, knowing is awareness - believing is acceptance.
- Knowing is perceiving - believing is receiving.
  - The apostle John wrote, "Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God (John 1:12).
- Believing is not necessarily easy. It's multi-layered - it involves the agreement of the mind, the acceptance of the heart, and the alignment of the will.

- Believing requires honest self-examination: Do I agree? Do I accept? Do I trust?
- Believing is a choice, but not without reason or passion - it's a choice informed by the knowledge of Christ and inspired by the Spirit of Christ.
  - It's a choice that requires humble dependence. The man seeking healing for his son, said to Jesus, "I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!" (Mark 9:24)
  - Believing is a choice that involves ongoing vigilance. The writer of Hebrews warned, "We must pay more careful attention, therefore, to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away." (Heb 2:1-2)
- Are you strengthening and growing your beliefs in the person, promises, grace and wisdom of Jesus? In the sovereignty, love, justice, and providence of the Father? In the presence, peace, prompting, and power of the Holy Spirit?

If so, you are fueling the next step in this progression of spiritual growth....

### C. Loving God

- Like believing, loving God involves the mind, heart, and will, but goes even further to include actions and behavior as well. Remember Jesus' affirmation of the greatest commandment? "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength." (Mark 12:29-30)
- Loving God is a willing act of obedience in grateful response to his sacrificial love for us. 1 John says, "We love because he first loved us." (1 John 4:19)
  - How do you grow in your love for God? You don't force yourself to love him, you bring yourself to realize and accept how intimately, passionately and unconditionally he loves you, at your best and at your worst - always has and always will.
 

You regularly reflect on the horrible shame, suffering and death Jesus took on in your place, and you let it break your heart into loving him in return.
  - When we deeply and continuously believe and receive his love and grace in mind and heart over time, it ignites and fuels our love and devotion for him.
- Genuine love of God is a grateful and willing act of obedience that spawns more obedience. Jesus said, "If you love me, you will obey what I command." (John 14:15) He was not trying to manipulate his disciples through guilt, he was simply stating a fact - those who truly love me, obey me. And that of course brings us to the final element of this cycle of spiritual growth...

#### D. Obeying God

- Obeying God is the goal of spiritual growth. Obeying him out of awestruck awareness of his majesty, resolute belief in his goodness, and grateful love for his mercy and grace.
- The apostle Paul stated it in his letter to the Romans, where he wrote, "Through him [Jesus] and for his name's sake, we received grace and apostleship to call people from among all the Gentiles to the obedience that comes from faith." (Rom. 1:5)
- Sometimes I think we can mistakenly equate being released by the sacrifice of Christ, from judgement under the law, with being relieved of our need to obey. But what changed with Christ is the basis of our acceptance, not the goal of obedience. Jesus freed us from the obedience of fear, to restore us to the obedience of faith and love, from the desperate striving of the obedience of fear, to the joyful partnership of the obedience of love and faith.
- What a gift and new way of life! Restored to obedience from a whole new understanding, appreciation, and motivation to obey the God whose instructions, commands, wisdom and will have always been for our greatest good and ultimate joy!
- To obey him from love and faith, is to experience the most joyful, beneficial, fruitful, and fulfilling life we could ever know!

#### III. But it gets even better! The growth cycle of knowing, believing, loving and obeying God is actually a growth spiral!

For you see, obeying God opens up a new levels of knowing God. Jesus said, "Whoever has my commands and obeys them, he is the one who loves me. He who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I too will love him and show myself to him." (John 14:21) The more we obey Jesus, the more he will show us of who he is, what he's like, what he's up to, and what parts he has for us to play in his kingdom work in this world.

And that triggers a whole new cycle, as new levels of knowing God, foster greater belief in him, which fuels more love for him, which motivates more obedience to him, which brings more knowledge of him - and ever upward our spiral of growth goes, right through the end of this life and into the life to come!

#### Conclusion

Know, Believe, Love and Obey—the spiral of spiritual growth toward the likeness of Jesus That's how we become children of God who live in ready, willing, and ongoing obedience to Jesus, from a mind and heart of resilient faith and supreme love, grounded in his Word, inspired by his Spirit, and built up by his people.

**To grow or not to grow is a choice - and we grow better together!**