



GROW 104

WHAT NOW?

Once we enter a relationship with God, he desires that relationship to grow. And, even though we can't see him, we grow that relationship in basically the same way we do with anyone: we learn more about him, we communicate with him, and we develop greater trust in him. When we do that, our eyes are opened to an exciting and wonderful place — a place where we can know by experience the full life Jesus describes.

Unfortunately, after we respond in faith and decide to follow Christ, things do not suddenly become easy. We may struggle or even suffer; in fact Paul suggests we should plan on it (Romans 5:3-4, 8:17, 2 Corinthians 4:10, Philippians 3:10-11).

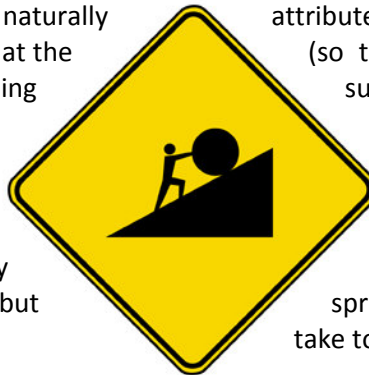
Instead of getting easier, walking The Way of Christ has more in common with training for a marathon; it consists primarily of things that don't come naturally and might even be uncomfortable or painful at the start. But, like kicking a bad habit or developing a good one, it eventually becomes easier. However, we should be careful we don't make the mistake of saying that, under the power of the Holy Spirit, these good habits become "natural." Instead, they become "second nature," never natural, but doable.



Do you see your Christian walk more as your responsibility or God's? Why?



If you saw your personal development more as teamwork with God and other Christians than something you must do on your own, how would it change the way you pursue it?



For simplicity's sake, let's call these hard-won habits "virtues." This is most likely what Paul would have called them, especially while speaking to the Greeks, who held virtue in high esteem. Paul provided us three virtues above all others: **Faith**, **Hope** and **Love** (1 Cor 13:13). But two things are weird about this. First, these three things would not have been considered the best things to strive for by the culture Paul was addressing (much like today), so Paul was suggesting we strive after new virtues. And second, the Greek view (similar to the American "bootstraps" mentality) would have suggested that developing virtues is a testament to the greatness of a man (you can be a hero), while Paul attributes their development to a man's choice to pursue virtue by pursuing the God who empowers him to do so (you can be a disciple). This was radical thinking then, and it is radical still today. People today want to attribute virtue either to exclusively personal effort (so they can take all the credit) or exclusively supernatural provision (so they can blame God if they fail), but the truth is not "either or" it is "both and."

So how do we pursue God so that we can develop virtue and experience the fruit that springs from virtuous living? What steps can we take toward being more fully human, *teleios*?

JOIN THE STORY

We can actively strive to know God better. Paul points us in this direction.

May your roots go down deep into the soil of God's marvelous love. And may you have the power to understand, as all God's people should, how wide, how long, how high, and how deep his love really is. May you experience the love of Christ, though it is so great you will never fully understand it. Then you will be filled with the fullness of life and power that comes from God. ~ Ephesians 3:17b-19 (NLT)

Paul prays that the people would grasp how important it is to know God better, but he already told us that this comes from changing the way we think (renewing our minds). Perhaps the best way to better know God – to change the way we think about him – is to study the Bible, but we may need to do it in a new way. We need to start looking at the Bible as God's story and ourselves as characters in that story. We are Acts, chapter 29.



If you thought about the Bible less as a textbook to be mastered than a story that you are a part of, how would that impact your desire to read it?

Have you ever studied your genealogy? My wife used to be really into this. She was chasing birth certificates, shipping manifests, obituaries, and family histories down all manner of rabbit trails, dead ends, and cul de sacs. She did interviews and wrote letters and did research. This may seem like a great deal of work, but if you asked her, she would tell you that, through learning more about where she came from, she better understands who she is and why. Family gatherings have a whole new weight and meaning. She now feels as if she is part of a bigger story, one character in a broader narrative. This is directly analogous to our Christian walk.

If you really want to understand your place in the family of God, do some genealogical research. Stop reading the Bible like an instruction book or a list of guidelines and starting digging into it like you might just learn something about who you are and who God is and why it matters. And maybe your “family gatherings” will take on a whole new life. And this new life will build faith, hope and love.

Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ. ~ Romans 10:17

JOIN THE CONVERSATION

Imagine how exciting it would be to pick up the phone and have God immediately available to listen. The

reality is that we do have this connection, though not through phone lines. We have a direct connection to God through prayer.



Which of the following best describes the purpose of prayer?

- ask God for stuff
- tell God what's going on
- get God to do things
- show God how much I believe in him
- all of the above
- none of the above

We are instructed to come before God boldly. It is in God's presence that we can find mercy, grace, and help.

Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need. ~ Hebrews 4:16

Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective.

~ James 5:16

Even Jesus, who was the most connected person to ever live, still went away to pray (Matthew 14:23 and others). Maybe it's all about staying connected.

Jesus tells us how to pray like he prays. He begins by saying we should not be hypocrites, praying just to be seen and to look pious (in fact, it would be better to pray in a closet than to do that), and also not to think that the more you say the more likely you are to be heard. Instead, just say what you mean, and expect to be heard, because God already knows what you need even before you ask (my comments are in parentheses)...

"This, then, is how you should pray: Our Father in heaven (recognize who God is and our relationship to him), hallowed be your name (respect him for who he is), your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven (ask that you can be part of the solution, in anticipation of the day when God's kingdom will renew earth). Give us today our daily

bread (ask for continued provision). Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors (ask for mercy and grace, and the power to offer the same for others). And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one (ask for help to follow paths that reflect your identity as an image bearer, and to respect God's created order – i.e., respect his dominion). ~ Matthew 6:8-15

Paul also tells us that even if we don't have the exact right words or know what to ask for, but we should still talk to God. ...

For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words. ~ Romans 8:26

And we should pray for others, interceding for them like the Spirit does for us...

I appeal to you, brothers, by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit, to strive together with me in your prayers to God on my behalf.

~ Romans 15:30

Also, Paul talks about being constantly in prayer in several places (2 Thessalonians 1:11, Ephesians 6:18, Romans 12:12, 2 Timothy 1:3). Does this mean you can be better connected if you never leave your knees? Wouldn't we be likely to lapse into "babbling like the pagans, thinking we will be heard by our many words?" Again, it is not "either or" but "both and." Get on your knees when you can, but when you cannot, you can live a life that is a prayer to God.



Do you tend to compartmentalize your life between what seems spiritual (going to church, reading religious books, praying) and what seems non-spiritual (work, relationships, leisure, sleep)? How does that compartmentalization affect your connection with God?

Living a life in conversation with God is staying connected moment-by-moment. It is like never turning off your cell phone, only not annoying. Be open to God

speaking to you (indirectly through his creation, your circumstances, or interactions with others, and directly through opportunities to serve and opening your heart in quiet time with him), and take your concerns to him – not just as a last resort, but as a first step. You don't necessarily need to sit around waiting for a response, but the act of bringing things to him, submission to his will, is all you've been asked to do. Christ rules and dwells within us by his Spirit, no matter what we are doing. So, whatever we do throughout the day – whether changing diapers, programming computers, talking to friends, reading the Bible, or sitting in traffic – we should do it with God. He is there with us already.



If you really believed this, how would it change your prayer life?



How does this differ from what you have been taught about prayer and communicating with God?

JOIN THE CONGA LINE

In this segment, we have just touched on a life of spiritual discipline. One of your options at the end of this study is to dig deeper into this idea, learning not just Bible study and prayer, but considering fasting, worship, and other habits. And our next two segments will consider the habit of service.

When you start living the life we have been describing in the last two segments, something weird starts to happen. Your dependence on God, your submission to his will, and your persistent striving for discipleship work together to create something new, that new thinking that Paul talks about, the thinking that leads ultimately to transformation and brings you steps closer to a full human life. For simplicity's sake, let's call this new life Christian character.

Lest you accuse me of promoting a "works salvation," let's look again to Paul (my comments are in parentheses)...

Make every effort to live in peace with all men and to be holy (example); without holiness no one will see the Lord (neither the holy, nor those around them). See to it that no one misses the grace of God (be a light) and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many (not a hypocrite or a judge or a dissenter). See that no one is sexually immoral, or is godless like Esau, who for a single meal sold his inheritance rights as the oldest son (do not trade the wonderful gift of your Father for a full stomach – the eternal for the fleeting).

~ Hebrews 12:14-16

We need to put forth effort, make good choices, and follow certain paths. “But,” you say, “doesn’t Paul say elsewhere that there is nothing we can do to attain our salvation?”

For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast.

~ Ephesians 2:8-9

So, “Yes,” but, in the very next verse, Paul elaborates...

For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.

We perform these acts of service and develop these spiritual disciplines not to attain something, but because of who we are in relation to our creator. We are called to something much greater than just some future destination; we are called to be agents of the Father (see above), the dwelling place of his Spirit (1 Peter 2), and the imitators of his Son (Ephesians 5:1).

After considering what Paul tells us about Christian virtue and spiritual fruit, and then thinking about our character, we may think that we'll never measure up to what God desires. We may remember all the times we tried to change and the frustration that resulted. If so, we'll certainly understand the ideas the Apostle Paul has about following God in the next passage.

I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do ... I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out ... What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God—through Jesus Christ our Lord! ~ Romans 7:15, 18 & 24-25.



What habit do you wish to grow or to quit? What hope do you find in Paul's struggles?

Paul's frustration led him to cry out. But he answers his own question. Jesus is the answer. He gives us relief from the guilt and the shame of our old life. Remember Jesus' words in John 15:5? (“...*apart from me you can do nothing.*”) Jesus and Paul seem to be saying roughly the same thing. It's a struggle, but there's a better way.

FIND THE FINISH LINE

Trusting to the point of obedience runs contrary to what we have been taught in our culture. We are not comfortable giving over our freewill for obedience, but apparently, obeying God's love commands is connected somehow with joyful living...

I have loved you even as the Father has loved me. Remain in my love. When you obey me, you remain in my love, just as I obey my Father and remain in his love. I have told you this so that you will be filled with my joy. Yes, your joy will overflow!

~ John 15:9-11 (NLT)

Is this is the destination we are striving for in developing Christian virtue? Yes! Living life in obedience to God's calling is not punishment; it is pure joy!

Those who live according to the sinful nature have their minds set on what that nature desires; but those who live in accordance with the Spirit have their minds set on what the Spirit desires. The mind of sinful man is death, but the mind controlled by the Spirit is life and peace. ~ Romans 8:5-6a

REFLECTION

In your life, when have you seen yourself following God's Spirit? Do you see that changing you from the inside out?

How do you intend to stay connected to God moment by moment? What are your intentions?

When was the last time you really examined your life to see where you're growing or where you're falling short?

Are spiritual practices (or "disciplines") such as Bible reading, prayer, worship, or service part of your life? Are you committed to building these habits into your life to allow God's Spirit to produce Fruit in you? What's your next step?

When we decide to continually stay connected and walk by the Spirit, the fruit of the Spirit becomes a barometer to help us gauge how your character growth. What do you think is your biggest barrier to character growth right now? What is needed to overcome that?

Keeping in step with the Spirit is a continual journey, not a one-time moment where we say "God lead me." Instead, it is one step at a time, one moment at a time, of asking the Spirit to lead us.

SO FAR:

Paul talks about three main virtues:

F _____, H _____, and L _____.

The Bible is God's S _____ and your S _____.

Prayer is about staying C _____ to God.

It's possible to live a L _____ of P _____.

S _____ & S _____ leads to new H _____.

You are saved by G _____ for G _____ W _____.