

Dealing With the Spiritual in 2016

Your life in Christ begins with everything you've ever done wrong wiped out, forgiven and forgotten. But after that **must** come spiritual growth. Before you can become what God intends you to be, you have to grow spiritually. This isn't an optional thing - it's necessary.

Jesus told a story of a farmer sowing seed to illustrate barriers to spiritual growth and keys to growing to your full potential. In those days they spread seed by hand. As this farmer throws the seed, it falls on four different kinds of soil representing different responses to God. The farmer is God, the seed is God's Word, the soil is your attitude and responsiveness. Many of us have heard this story many times in our lives, but let's look at what it teaches us for a new year. Jesus says if I want to grow spiritually in 2016:

1. I Must Be Receptive and Responsive to Change. You have to want to grow, be eager and ready to grow - spiritually receptive; responsive to God. If you're fine with yourself the way you are and don't see any need to change, you're not going to grow. The main reason most people don't grow spiritually is actually pretty straightforward and obvious: They don't really want to all that much. When you come to church, that shows some degree of receptiveness to growing in spirit and truth, but a lot of people go to church for years without changing at all. Beyond that, there are hundreds of thousands of people within driving distance of us right now who don't even have that much receptiveness at this point.

Jesus said, *"A farmer went out to plant his seed. As he scattered it across his field, some seed fell on a footpath, where it was stepped on, and the birds ate it."* Then he said, *"The seeds that fell on the footpath represent those who hear the message, only to have the devil come and take it away from their hearts and prevent them from believing and being saved."*

On farms at that time there were footpaths through the crops. Farmers kept to those paths to avoid damaging soil or crops. Because the paths were used over and over for generations, the soil got compacted. That made them hard and narrow. A lot of peoples' hearts and minds are like that: hard hearts and narrow minds. "Don't confuse me; I have my mind made up." When seed gets thrown on hard-packed soil it doesn't penetrate. It just lays on the surface - there's no growth or change.

Sometimes we're like this. For example, we don't give God the opportunity to answer prayer because we don't really pray deeply on a consistent basis. We don't give God a chance to do remarkable things in our life because we don't expect anything remarkable. We don't give God a chance to show us how to grow in our churches because we think we know how to run a church and growth is uncomfortable and messy. When minds are closed, hearts are hard and there isn't going to be any spiritual growth.

So what causes us to be so unwilling to change or unwilling to be challenged? What makes us so defensive? You can be sure it's one of three reasons:

The first reason is anxiety. Obviously if we're afraid of what God wants we're not going to want to get closer to God. We think, "What if God asks me to do something I don't want to do?" Let me tell you something: that's actually a legitimate fear. God probably WILL ask you to do MANY things you don't want to do. Or, "What if I can't do what I want to do? What if I grow spiritually and can't do some things I enjoy? What if it's inconvenient or uncomfortable?" That's a legitimate fears because following God is often inconvenient and uncomfortable. What if I have to put up with things I don't like or things that are inconvenient for me? That will happen! But if you close your mind or harden your heart out of fear, you're missing why Jesus came to die for us and don't really know what God is like.

The second reason is resentment over being hurt in the past. They think, "If God allowed that, no thanks!" They may not say it consciously but it's there. Some have lost someone they really loved. Some have been abused emotionally, some physically. Some have had a spouse walk out or betray them and the pain of rejection still hurts. Some are hurt by people claiming to be believers or got burned in some church by some self-righteous, judgmental person. They think, "If this is Christianity, no thanks!" When you hold resentment in your heart toward God there's no way you'll grow spiritually. You can't do both at the same time.

Why did God allow it to happen? I don't know. But I do know this: I do know that earth is not a perfect place. I do know that God's given us freedom and when you have freedom you often choose to do wrong things and that hurt others and others do wrong things that hurt you. I do know that if we were as close to God as we were meant to be we wouldn't have this struggle, but we do. I don't know all the answers but I do know God hates sin - because it hurts people. God hates sin when I do it, when you do it and when other people do it to you. I'll say

this: If you've been hurting, I'm sorry you hurt and God hurts with you. Don't turn away from God. Let your pain turn you toward God where you can receive comfort. Never let a person or experience get between you and God – it'll make it worse and keep you from growing spiritually. You need to deal with the issue. When we hold onto our hurt, our hearts become cold and hard. And when we're hardened nothing can grow.

There's a third block and that's pride - and I'm talking about pride in the negative sense here: Pride that involves a feeling of superiority, the attitude of someone who believes he or she is better than others or able to get along without their involvement. This is self-involvement; self importance. We like to think, "I'm pretty self sufficient. I can handle it. I can figure it out." If I don't think I need God, I'm not receptive to God.

The big problem is that an unreceptive, hard heart and a closed mind creates a barren life. What God wants to grow, can't grow. When the seed gets thrown on hard ground, nothing much sprouts. Birds come along and eat what's left. This life is for the birds! It's wasted!

Second: 2. I Must Be Resolved and Responsible for Growth. That means I've got to make a decision, a resolution, a commitment. I have to accept responsibility for my own spiritual growth. If you don't get anything else today, get this: Spiritual growth, spiritual maturity is a choice. You're as close to God as you want to be. Don't blame anyone else. It's not God's fault. You can't blame your husband, wife, parents, kids or anyone else. If you're not maturing spiritually, it's because you've chosen to not mature spiritually. If you want to grow you must resolve to grow. Without resolution, without commitment you're never going to grow spiritually. Instead, you're going to live a pretty shallow, superficial life.

Jesus said this is what the second kind of soil represents. Verse 6, *"Other seed fell among rocks. It began to grow, but the plant soon wilted and died for lack of moisture."* In Israel, most land is a thin layer of topsoil over solid bedrock. When the Bible talks about rocky soil it's not just a bunch of rocks, it's rock on rock. When you plant things there they grow to a certain point in the loose soil around the rocks, but they can't have deep roots because the underlying rock prevents it. So when winds come they're knocked over. When the summer heat comes, those plants wilt.

Jesus is says a lot of people are like this. Verse 13 says, *"The seeds on the rocky soil represent those who hear the message and receive it with joy. But since they don't have deep roots, they believe for a while, then they fall away when they face temptation."* That shallow soil represents a superficial commitment.

Notice they receive the word with joy. Have you ever gotten excited when you heard a sermon or message that really touched you? Maybe you got charged up or emotional. Maybe you were intellectually challenged or emotionally stirred. But then a few minutes later you forgot it - it wasn't rooted. You're thrilled but not transformed. Until we let the word of God penetrate deep into us, it's going nowhere. We're emotionally stirred but it is a shallow commitment.

What can keep us growing? It has to be more than a feeling. It has to be an action. It has to be something I decide to do or else nothing is going to happen.

If I were to go to my son Ben and ask him very nicely to clean out the shed and a couple of days later it's still a mess, I'd say, "What's the deal with the shed?" And he says, "When you asked me to clean the shed, it was beautiful the way you asked. It brought tears to my eyes. I told several of my friends about how you asked me to clean the shed." But my question is still, *"Why isn't the shed cleaned out?"*

We can be like that with God. We appreciate what God tells us - we might even be excited about it - but then we don't do much about it and because of that we don't grow. It's a struggle we all share. Studies show that we only remember about five percent of what we hear after 72 hours. It's not easy to remember what was heard. It's way too easy to come to church and hear something but never do anything about it.

In Matthew 7:26 Jesus said, *"But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand."* It's not going to last unless you do something about it, unless you invest time and energy and do something. One reason we give you these outlines each week is to help you do that. You can take them home, read it over, talk about it to a friend and in your small group and decide "What am I going to do about it?" Most of us would say we'd like to grow spiritually, but that desire fades. How do you make the desire to grow stick? You do it by putting down roots. How do you put down roots so this desire to grow that most of us have becomes a reality in our lives? You do it by making and keeping commitments.

James 1:22 says, *“Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says.”* There’s something dangerous about coming to church. You can come to church and hear somebody else talk about God, talk about growth, and go away thinking that somehow you’ve grown spiritually. The truth is you’ve just heard somebody else talk about it. Until we do something about it, we haven’t really grown or made any progress spiritually. It takes commitment and work.

So, where do you get started? Let me give you five commitments to help you get started.

1. Presence - Commit to connect with others. When you spend time with other people who want to grow spiritually you begin to become like the people you spend the most time with. You reinforce one another. That’s the number one factor to help you grow – the encouragement of other people.

2. Prayers - Commit to build spiritual habits. If I want to grow from spending time in God’s Word it takes a commitment to make it a habit. If I want to grow from talking to God in prayer I have to remember that it doesn’t come natural, I’ve got to make a commitment to DO it. I have to build these spiritual habits into my daily life.

3. Gifts - Commit to use my resources - to take whatever gifts, whatever resources God’s given me and use them to help others and build up Christ’s Body, the church. When I do that, people are helped and I grow as well.

4. Service - Commit to serve. To take whatever gifts, whatever abilities and talents, God’s given me to use in fulfilling God’s purpose. To care for others and bring glory to God - to make a difference in the world.

5. Witness - Commit to share my faith, to tell other people the good news about what God has done in my life. When you take the good news and share it with someone else, it amplifies it in your life.

Make these commitments, start to send down roots in these areas, and you begin to grow spiritually. These five commitments are the foundation and the structure of our church and the reason this church exists. We have things specifically designed to help you keep these commitments:

1. I Preach It. I teach these commitments over and over and over – about the importance of connecting with others, the importance of building spiritual habits, the importance of sharing my faith, developing my gifts, serving others, telling people about Jesus Christ. But just because we’ve taught it doesn’t mean you’re doing it. The thing is, these are what Jesus taught. So I teach them.

2. We have **Crosstraining Seminars** to cover these commitments. Those classes are built around them. If you haven’t taken any of those, you’re not doing everything you can to get what you need to fulfill your commitments.

3. We have **Small Groups**. Small groups are made to help you make and keep these five covenants. If you’re not in a group, you’re not going to get the support you need to make and keep these commitments.

So what’s your next step? If you haven’t taken all the Crosstraining seminars take that next step. If you haven’t taken these you may have trouble understanding where we’re going with things as a church or feel like you’re missing what’s going on because it’s all covered in Crosstraining.

If you haven’t joined a small group, take that step. If you haven’t gotten involved in a ministry – whatever it is – don’t just listen and be deluded into thinking you’re growing. Hearing and growing just are **NOT** the same thing. You’re not growing until you put it into action.

Let’s go on to our final point - **3. I Must Be Ruthless and Relentless about Distractions.** Things that keep me from really growing, I must be hardnosed in dealing with them. Your most important personal objective in life is to grow spiritually. Once you know Jesus Christ, it’s more important than your job, than your interests, than making money and retiring. It’s the very reason you were put on this earth. God put you here to get to know him, develop a relationship with him, to grow spiritually and become what God meant for you to be. If you miss this you’ve wasted your life. What we’re talking about this morning is no small matter.

Because it’s so important the devil will think up all kinds of things to keep you from growing spiritually and do things to get you off track and steal your focus. There are lots of things that can waste your time and energy and dampen your enthusiasm for growing spiritually.

Jesus called these distractions weeds. Weeds grow up in your life and begin to choke out the spiritual growth so you don’t have any vitality to get to know God or to become what God wants you to be. The third type of soil represents this barrier to growth. Luke 8:7 says, *“Other seed fell among thorns that grew up with it and choked out the tender plants.”* Then Luke 8:14 says, *“The seeds that fell among the thorns represent those who hear the*

message, but all too quickly the message is crowded out by the cares and riches and pleasures of this life. And so they never grow into maturity.”

He says the seed sprouts in your life and you begin to grow spiritually but after a while it's choked out by weeds. It's crowded out and it can't bear fruit.

An overcrowded life keeps you from growing spiritually. When things in my life crowd out God, it chokes my spiritual vitality. Why are there so many people who live unproductive lives as believers? Why are there many people that become believers but they don't grow, don't bear fruit, don't grow to maturity, don't bring others to faith? It's an overcrowded life.

Jesus says we get weeds in our lives. A weed is anything that crowds out God. It could be a good thing. It could be a career, a hobby, television, fun things to do, interests or chores. Anything that crowds out God and keeps me from growing spiritually becomes a weed that grows up in my life and chokes my spiritual growth.

We often confuse activity and productivity. They're not the same. You can be busy and still unproductive. Sometimes we're so distracted that we don't grow because we don't have time for God. We don't have time to pray and talk to God, to sit down and spend time reading the Bible every day. Don't have time to get connected with other Christians, to be in a small group. We're too busy! We've chosen second-class things and put them in first place – and everything is second class compared to God. Those other things are important – but not more important than God. One day you can explain to God why you did that. Some of you used to be really on fire and there was a major passion, joy and enthusiasm in your life and you really felt close to God. But you don't feel that way as much now. Why? You've allowed other things to take your energy and crowd out your vision. Jesus, in the verse points out three kinds of weeds.

1. The cares of life. The problems and the pressures and the worries of life. The word here in Greek *merimna* means “pulled in different directions”.

2. Riches can choke your vitality. You can be so busy making and worrying about money, you don't have time for growth. So busy making a living you don't make a life.

3. Pleasures can be a weed. You can be too busy having fun that you forget God. “I don't have time. I'm going to watch TV... I'm going off to do something.”

What does it take to grow weeds in life? In your backyard, how much effort does it take to grow weeds? Zero! Zip! It doesn't take anything! Do you have to plant weeds? No. Do you have to fertilize the weeds? No. Weeds only require one thing – neglect. When I neglect my relationship with God, weeds grow up in my relationship to God.

So what do you do with weeds? Rip them out! Uproot them! Get rid of them! You don't say, “May I please pull you out?” If there are weeds there they'll suck the energy and vitality out of that soil that rightly belongs to those other plants.

What do you need to weed out in your life? You need to be ruthless in eliminating distractions. You can get so many irons in the fire you put out the fire. If you're burning the candle at both ends, you're not as bright as you think you are! You're going to burn out.

So what needs to be uprooted? What is it in your life that needs to be eradicated? If you walk out the door and don't think about it, you probably won't think about it later. I want to pause right now for you to think of one thing you could *stop doing* so you can have more time for spiritual growth and getting to know God. Think of one thing that may be good but it's pulling you away from a time with God. You might even need to write it down. If we aren't ruthless in eliminating distractions, we end up wasting our lives.

Which of these barriers are slowing your growth? A closed mind? Are you unwilling to change or to be challenged? What's making you so defensive?

Is it a superficial commitment? I like going to church but I don't intend to do anything about it. And as soon as we're done today, I won't think much about it. I'm going to lunch!

An overcrowded life? Are you too busy for the most important things in life? What we're talking about this morning is of utmost importance.

Whatever is happening in life we all need to do some things about this: First, you need to cultivate an open attitude toward God: “God, I am receptive – anytime, anywhere, anything you want to do in my life, I'm open. I trust you. I know you want what's good for my life so go ahead whatever You want to do in my life, go ahead!”

Second, you make a commitment – a decision – to say, “I am going to grow! I'm going to do whatever it takes to grow. I'm going to make and keep those five commitments.” Then take the next step and put it into action.

Then you need to discover, identify and eliminate the weeds and be ruthless about second class causes that you've given first class allegiance to.

I want to warn you. The moment you walk out of here, Satan is going to try to steal that seed. Don't let him con you. Luke 8:15 says, *“And the seeds that fell on the good soil represent honest, good-hearted people who hear God's word, cling to it, and patiently produce a huge harvest.”* We have a harvest to get in. A harvest means a vast amount of work, but wonderful, fruitful times ahead. Right now, I want to pray for you about that.