

## Growing In Grace

Growth and Grace fit together but people don't always get things straight about HOW. Growth isn't just about how many meetings you attend, how many verses you memorize, minutes you spend in a devotion time or Christian books you read. We often make the mistake of thinking that just because we're involved in growth activities, we'll automatically be growing. Many people think that if they just attend church that somehow they'll inevitably grow. It doesn't work that way.

It's as if I decided I wanted to get more healthy physically and I went down to the local health club and brought my lawn chair with me and set it up in the middle of the club. For an hour or two I watch everyone exercise and then I get up, take my chair and go home feeling really good about how much exercise is going on. Maybe I even work to learn everything I can about exercise – I read books, watch videos. But then I never do much with the knowledge other than think about it.

How much real physical development is going on? Just doing things doesn't necessarily mean I'm growing.

Real growth as a believer is all about how much closer I'm getting to God. Am I closer to God than I was this time last year? It's about how much more I love my spouse; my family because of God's grace. It's about how much more I love and care about my neighbor; the people in my community because of God's grace. It's how much my character is being changed by God. And it's not a matter of quantity it's a matter of quality. Jesus didn't come to give you more things to do in your life, he said that he came to give you an abundant life - a new quality of life. And he gave us his grace - not just to get us started... he gave us grace to keep us going and growing.

Today we're going to talk about how God grows us. Just being a Christian doesn't guarantee this. There's a process of growth that God wants to work out in our lives. I know some people who've been Christians a long time but haven't grown a lot. Others who have been Christians just a short time have experienced amazing growth!

If you're thinking that what you need to do is just try a little harder to get this growth thing down, I'm afraid that's not how it works. Growth isn't a matter of just trying a little harder. Growth is a gift of grace. It begins by grace and it also continues by grace. We grow in the grace and the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

We're going to look today at the process God uses in us. It's simple but it's powerful. And if you really take it to heart your life is never the same after. But before we look at God's process for growing you in grace, let's look at some ways it doesn't happen; ways that are NOT enough.

We don't grow in grace, **1. By Doing More and More Good Things.** Some people feel like if they could just do enough good things then they'd really grow in grace.

I had an uncle who died a few years ago. He was a gifted surgeon. He helped tens of thousands of people – he helped the hundreds who he worked on directly and he helped many, many more who have benefitted from the techniques he developed. Chances are someone you know, maybe someone in your family, is alive or at least has benefitted from this man's work.

But he was a nasty guy in person – greedy, authoritarian, self-involved, vindictive, hard on his wife and kids. For all the good he did for people, he wasn't as good as a person and he never grew as a person. Doing good is good, but it's not enough. It won't help you grow like God wants you to.

You don't grow **2. By Keeping Rules.** Hebrews 13:9 says it straight out: *"Your strength comes from God's grace, not from rules..."* It's not by obeying rules that my heart's strengthened. It's by God's grace. There's a place for rules. When your children are little, they need some rules. But as they get older they need more and more freedom and more and more personal responsibility. If you continued to treat your children like they were three years old during their years of development, when they go off to college or off to the job market, would they be ready for the world? No way.

Rules can't produce growth. They control things, they control people. But you can't produce growth through rules. What's the place of rules in the Bible? The Law - the Commandments - give us the basics; not the aspirations but the bottom line; give us direction for behavior. But power doesn't come through rules. Rules can't produce growth.

Trying to use rules to produce growth is called religion. We make a bunch of rules about our relationship with God thinking somehow that's going to produce growth. It never has worked, it never will work. Instead, God says, "I've got a new way for you to live." Growth comes from grace.

You don't grow, **3. By Condemning or Punishing Yourself.** Sometimes we act like, "If I just feel bad enough about myself, maybe I'll get better." If I really heap the guilt on, maybe I'll get better. Just logically, you can see what

that won't work. If I feel bad about myself, I don't tend to get better, I just feel bad. That's not what God intends to do at all!

Look at the promise God makes to those who put faith in God. Romans 8:34 says, "*Who then will condemn us? No one—for Christ Jesus died for us and was raised to life for us, and he is sitting in the place of honor at God's right hand, pleading for us.*" When we celebrate Easter, we're celebrating the fact that God doesn't condemn us because of Jesus Christ. God wants to come into our lives, give us grace, and never condemn us again. If God doesn't condemn us, why do we spend so much time condemning ourselves as if that's going to change us. It doesn't change us.

So today we're going to look at God's process for growth. You can find it in many places in the Bible, but a good instance can be seen in Ephesians 4:21-24: "*Since you... were taught how the truth is in Jesus, change the former way of life that was part of the person you once were, corrupted by deceitful desires. Instead, renew the thinking in your mind by the Spirit and clothe yourself with the new person created according to God's image in justice and true holiness.*" Did you hear it? Change your way of life, renew your thinking, cloth yourself as a new person.

So we begin **1. By Changing Our Way of Life** - "*change the former way of life that was part of the person you once were.*" This involves making a break with your assumptions and attitude. You change your approach, your outlook, your mind-set. You can't count on what used to be. You can't cling to only what worked for you at one point in your life or at one point in time. That's what the Pharisees and teachers of the law wanted to do - hang on to what worked for them in the past, but Jesus constantly said things like, "You have heard it said... but I say to you..." You need to know the past, but you have to build on the grace that God is providing now. In Matthew 13:52 Jesus said, "*Every teacher of religious law who becomes a disciple in the Kingdom of Heaven is like a homeowner who brings from his storeroom new gems of truth as well as old.*" When you become a disciple, you teach and learn in new ways. Romans 7:6 says, "*...we have been released from the law, for we died to it and are no longer captive to its power. Now we can serve God, not in the old way of obeying the letter of the law, but in the new way of living in the Spirit.*"

Jesus didn't die for us so that we could cling to the past. If our faith is real, we'll want more; we'll crave more. 1 Peter 2:2-3 says, "*Like newborn babies, you must crave pure spiritual milk so that you will grow into a full experience of salvation. Cry out for this nourishment, now that you have had a taste of the Lord's kindness.*"

Jesus told us in Matthew 9:17 "*... no one puts new wine into old wineskins. For the old skins would burst from the pressure, spilling the wine and ruining the skins. New wine is stored in new wineskins so that both are preserved.*" Since most of you don't have a wineskin hanging in your backyard we need to talk about this. Back then, they'd pour new wine into a leather wineskin and as the wine fermented it would expand and the wineskin would expand with it. On the inside the wine would keep the leather soft, but on the outside the leather of the wineskin would harden. Then after you poured the wine out, if you took new wine and poured it into that old wineskin, when it began to expand the outside wouldn't have its original flexibility and it would burst.

Jesus was saying if you don't get rid of old attitudes there won't be any room for growth. It may look like it would work, and it worked in the past, but there's not enough room there for the kind of genuine change you need. That's an old model – the model that the Pharisees were involved with during Jesus' time on earth. There's not enough room for development in that method; not enough room for becoming all that God wants me to be. I can't grow enough.

Then the next step in the process is, **2. By Renewing Our Thoughts and Attitudes.** "*...renew the thinking in your mind by the Spirit.*" Basically, we need to get a better attitude - one that's in line with our new nature. 2 Corinthians 5:17 NIV says, "*Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation, the old has gone, the new has come.*" This is a promise for those who are in Christ, who have trusted their lives to Christ and his leadership. The promise of the Christian life is the old is gone, the new has come. If that has indeed happened, then our old ways of thinking and our attitudes toward everything around us, toward God and toward ourselves change.

Romans 12:2 says, "*Don't copy the behavior and customs of this world, but let God transform you into a new person by changing the way that you think.*" That's where the power is – in a renewed mind. God's changed the way we think so we can see things as God sees them. That's having a renewed mind. The more I can see something as God sees it the more it changes the way I think. If I could really see this world as God sees it, I'd have more compassion for people. If I could really see my sins as God sees them, I'd see how they hurt me, I'd see how

they hurt others, I would see the eventual results of sin. I would change much more quickly if I could see it as God sees it.

The thing is, we need to allow God to change us - to make us new; to renew our thoughts and attitudes. God accepts you as if you've completely changed, because of what Jesus did for you, but God wants to renew you so you look more and more like Jesus. That change doesn't come about in a day. It will continue for the rest of your life. God changes us slowly but surely. The way Jesus talked to people becomes more and more the way I talk to people. The way Jesus dealt with relationships becomes more and more the way I deal with relationships. The way Jesus handled his time becomes more and more the way I handle my time.

Most people struggle with this. We think it's a great idea, but we have a hard time letting go of some of those old things. It's hard seeing myself in the new way that God wants me to see me. That's why it's also necessary to change, **3. By Putting on the New Nature.** *"...clothe yourself with the new person created according to God's image in justice and true holiness."* God wants you to put on your new nature. You were created to be like God—truly righteous and holy. God wants to get you there. Every day we need to be allowing God to guide us, to move us along. Daily we need to be taking off the old and putting on the new.

One thing to remember is we don't make ourselves new. God does that. It's as if God said, "I've got this \$1000 suit for you. Here it is! It's new life. Put it on. it." But we say, "I like what I can do myself. I'll keep the suit here to look at and appreciate, but I'll put together something of my own." And we find some scraps and pieces from here and there, put something together ourselves, put it on and say, "God, look at what I've made for you! Aren't you proud?" I think God looks at us and says, "Why don't you put on the new life I gave you? It's a gift. I want you to enjoy it. I want to do something in your life by grace that you could never do on your own."

This is a decision that I make every day of my life about the new life God gives. I have to put it on. Before you become a believer in Christ, you don't have the power to choose this. Once you become a believer you have the power to make a choice. But we struggle with that daily. It's so easy to fall back into the habit of doing it yourself. We're comfortable with our way of living and we tend to fall into comfortable habits. Sometimes we try to put the new life on right over the old life and have it both ways, but that doesn't work.

Sometimes we try to wear the old and the new on different occasions – back and forth. We live a double life – we've talked about that before: the Christian life demands integrity, being the same in every part of your life.

The great news is that by grace, God has given me a new life. I'm not talking pop psychology, pull yourself up by your own bootstraps and make things happen just because you've decided to. I'm talking about the truth of what God's done. The truth is, when you come to Christ, God gives you a new life. The more I accept this new life and live this new life, the more I look at the world and my relationships and my community and my resources and my preferences in the light of this new life, the more real it becomes to me. It's real already, but it only becomes real to me as I accept it. It's sort of like the physical laws of the universe - they were real before we noticed them, accepted them or understood them. But when we accept and begin to understand them, there are so many things that can happen and places we can go. Aerodynamics always existed, but when we noticed, accepted and began to understand them, we became able to imagine flying and learned to fly.

As we notice God's grace, accept God's grace and begin to understand God's grace, we are able to be and do more and more. It happens by grace through the presence of God in your daily life. It starts by grace, it continues day to day by grace in the power of God's Spirit - it doesn't come from ourselves or our own power. Galatians 3:3 says, *"How foolish can you be? After starting your new lives in the Spirit, why are you now trying to become perfect by your own human effort?"* It starts with God's Spirit and it continues in the Spirit all the way through. A renewed mind is not just self determination. It's determined dependence on God. It's not "I'm going to do this no matter what!" It's depending on God's grace, because that's where the power is. You live the Christian life the same way you started the Christian life. You live it by grace.

Let's say I got on a 747 to go to California. We get up in the air, get up to speed and altitude and I think, "We're going fast enough now. I think I can complete the trip on my own." So I pop open the door and step out, hoping that the speed I've gotten up to in the plane will carry me the rest of the way to California.

It's not going to work. I'd just drop like a rock! If you're depending on yourself for growth, if you're taking it into your own hands. As soon as you do that you start the free fall until you say, "God help me!" and God picks us up again.

Some people who aren't believers yet, who are considering what it means to be a believer in Christ say, "I'd like to become a Christian. But truthfully, I don't know if I can handle the rules for the rest of my life."

What I'm saying to you today is the Christian life is not a life of rules. The Christian life is a life of renewal and power. Maybe you've met some who've been trying to live the Christian life by rules or by doing good or by feeling bad but that's not what the Bible teaches about true Christianity. Real faith in Christ is built on God's grace.

There are two questions people have about growth. The first is, "Why does it take so long? I want to change and I've changed a little but why is it taking so long?"

It takes time to grow but remember that the growth we're talking about is part of a process that points toward eternity. When God changes your character, it's not for a few months or years, it's for eternal life. Because of that, yes, it takes some time - but the time is worth it. The changes that are happening are eternal. They're going to effect and impact eternity. God has a long term plan in mind.

The second question is, "How do I start in this growth thing?" Start with trust. Start by believing in God's ability to accomplish growth in your life. The motivation for growth isn't found in you. It's found in God. The motivational power is this: God wants and is willing and is working for us to grow every day of our life. The minute I come to God and give my life to God, God 's working in me to help me grow. If I had to wake up every morning for the rest of my life and motivate myself to grow, that would get discouraging. But the truth is, whether I feel motivated that day or not, God is motivated. And God's going to motivate me and strengthen me. God works with you. You just have to cooperate with what God's already doing.

There are two promises in the book of Philippians about how we can trust God to help us grow. Philippians 1:6 says *"...God, who began the good work within you, will continue his work until it is finally finished on the day when Christ Jesus returns."* Then Philippians 2:13 says, *"...God is working in you, giving you the desire and the power to do what pleases him."* Not only does God help me want to do the right thing, God helps me actually do it. It's not that I'll never want to do the wrong thing again because I will and you will too. But God's never going to give up on helping us do the right thing. That's what grace is all about.

You might think of it this way when it comes to renewing your mind and starting to trust God in a new way for growth. It's as if God wants to do a giant remodeling project in our brains, in the way we think about God and life and growth. Let me tell you, it's tough when you remodel. In our family we've been in a remodeling project since 2009. There's a lot of work involved. When I first thought about remodeling the house, it didn't seem like a huge amount of work. But what I didn't think about was that the most intensive and extensive work comes from the things you don't see ahead of time; from the hidden things that you only find out about when you begin to peel off the layers of old flooring and paint and paneling and whatever. It's a lot more work than it looks like at first.

The same happens with what God does in our lives. We say to God, "I need you to patch up this wall. If you could just do that for me then I'll be fine." God says, "No, no. we've got bigger things to do. We have to get at the wiring. I want to fix that load-bearing support. I want to upgrade that insulation." But to get to the wiring, what do you have to do? You have to tear down walls and that gets discouraging. It actually has to look worse before it even starts to look better. I wanted God to do this one little thing and it seems like more is happening. Why is God doing that? Why does God want to get to the wiring? Because God wants to change the power source of our lives. Why does God want to get to the supports? Because God sees the danger that's there that someday when we're under pressure we won't be able to hold up against it. God wants to get to it and change us now. Why does God want to get to the insulation? Because God knows we need more protection against the extremes in our lives. So God tears away at the walls. God gets to the wiring, God gets to the supports, God gets to the insulation, then God puts the walls back up. That's God's remodeling project in our lives.

Today, what I want to close with is an opportunity for you to say to God in prayer, "God, I'm in. I want to be a part of this. Would you do your work in my life for the rest of my life?" Let's pray.

**NOTE:** There will be a homework assignment after the prayer so advance to that slide after the "Amen" for me to give the homework to the congregation.