SPIRITUAL GROWTH

The Journey to Christlikeness

by David Laton
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Introduction

*Spiritual Growth – The Journey to Christlikeness* is intended to provide insights into how God helps us grow into who He wants us to become – like Christ. Becoming more and more Christlike is the essence of spiritual maturity and should be the overwhelming desire of all of us.

As part of this journey, we must understand the concept of spiritual maturity, where we are currently in our spiritual journey, and how we can fulfill this destiny. We must also understand that the purpose of this is ultimately to hear the wonderful words from our Lord, “Well done good and faithful servant” (Matthew 25:23). It is through becoming more spiritually mature that we are able to better serve the Master.

About the Author

Dave Laton currently serves the Prattville Church of Christ, Prattville, Alabama as a deacon with responsibilities for missions and internet ministries. He and his wife, Lynne, have been members of the congregation since 1993. Together they are also active in helping establish new congregations for the Lord’s church and in strengthening and encouraging small congregations as they seek to grow. In addition to his Doctor of Ministry degree in Religious Education Leadership, Dave holds degrees in Adult Education, Education Administration, and Business Management.
A story is told about a little boy named Joey who wanted to be like his friend Freddy. Freddy, however, wanted to be like his friend Billy. Turns out Billy wanted to be like Johnny. Then, it seems Johnny wanted to be like Joey. In the end, all Joey had to do was to be himself (Author unknown).

Each of us was uniquely created by God to be who we are. He’s given us unique physical, intellectual, and emotional capabilities. Some call these talents; others call them gifts. But one thing in common for all of us is that God wants us to be like Jesus. Becoming spiritually mature means that we are becoming more and more like Christ. Growing spiritually is described in this study as a journey because, in this life, we don’t reach a point where there is no more opportunity for spiritual growth. We have the capability and encouragement to grow more and more Christlike, but until we join our Lord in heaven, we will not have reached complete Christlikeness.
Desiring to know God is a worthy endeavor and critically important, but that desire is only a first step on the journey. This first step is only the beginning of an incredibly wonderful and rewarding journey to becoming who God wants us to be.

**WORK OUT**

Growth and development is normal and expected in all aspects of life. This is true of our physical growth but is also true of our intellectual and emotional growth; how we process and respond to information and interact with others. If we don’t grow intellectually and emotionally, then we will always be at a disadvantage in life. It also follows that we must grow spiritually. Spiritual growth is a part of our normal development. Some may develop to a greater level or quicker in all areas than others, depending on one’s capacity. Physically, we’re limited by our genetic capabilities. We continue to grow unless there is a physical disorder. The better the quality of physical nourishment (what we take in) is, the better our physical growth. We also know we should strive for a balanced diet and exercise to facilitate healthy growth and life.

Intellectually and emotionally, we’re limited somewhat by the amount and quality of information to which we’re exposed and to some extent, our interest, as well as our relationships with others. The more interested we are in something, the greater our motivation to continue to learn. It is also true that we should take in and expose ourselves to quality information and exercise our minds to facilitate intellectual and emotional growth.

Unlike physical, emotional, and intellectual growth, when it comes to spiritual growth, we’re limited only by our desire to grow. With spiritual growth, our best years are always ahead of us.
Defining Spiritual Growth
Spiritual growth is about closing the gap between who we currently are and who God wants us to be. No matter who we are or how long we’ve been in God’s family, there is still room to grow and mature. Simply put, spiritual growth means putting into practice what is taught in God’s Word.

God’s Word encourages us to grow spiritually. We are encouraged to put away the things in this world that harm us and long instead for spiritual nourishment (1 Peter 2:1-2). We’re encouraged in 2 Peter 1:5-8 to build on the virtues God sees as good and nourishing so that we can be effective and fruitful for our Lord. We are encouraged to grow in grace and knowledge of Jesus (2 Peter 3:18). Many more verses from God’s Word not only encourage us but also teach us how we can begin and sustain our growth.

Common Misunderstandings Regarding Spiritual Growth
Many misconceptions or misunderstandings abound regarding spiritual growth, but what God’s Word teaches us is reality. One misunderstanding is that I’ll never be spiritually mature because I’m such a flawed person.

The truth is that we are all flawed (1 John 1:8). That’s why God sent His Son. He made a way for us to be reconciled back to Him through the sacrifice of His Son, Jesus. We seek to know and obey the teachings of Jesus so that when God sees us, He sees His Son who is perfect (Colossians 3:3). We have everything we need pertaining to life and godliness (2 Peter 1:3; Ephesians 1:3). We are also made new creations through our obedience to Jesus (2 Corinthians 5:17).

Another misunderstanding is that I’m spiritually mature because I’ve been in the church for a long time; perhaps even a lifetime.

The truth is that time has a way of working against us; we might become complacent. Someone once said that spiritual maturity is not measured by a calendar. Our Lord told a parable that addressed
this issue of time and salvation in Matthew 20:1-16. In this parable we see the master of the vineyard hiring workers at various times of the day. Then at the end of the day, he pays each the same amount, no matter how long they had been working that day. Some grumbled about this, feeling that since they had worked longer they should earn more. The master responded with the answer that each had received what had been promised, regardless of how much time each worked. We can take away from this that time in the church is not the point of issue, obedient service to the Master is.

Another misunderstanding is if I know a lot about the Bible, then I am spiritually mature.

The truth is that facts, data, information, and intelligence should help one grow spiritually, but by themselves, do not indicate a level of spiritual maturity. There is a difference between knowing about Jesus and knowing Jesus. Unless our knowledge results in our obeying and following Christ, it is useless. Knowledge that leads us away from Christ will destroy us. Knowledge that leads us away from Christ will destroy us. Paul speaks to this in Romans 12:1-2. In this passage he tells us that we must transform our minds through God’s Word. To transform means to bring about change from one form to another. Spiritual transformation comes from not only knowing God’s Word, but applying it in our lives so that, once again, we journey to Christlikeness.

Another example of this is found in Acts 2. The people in the crowd at Pentecost undoubtedly knew of Jesus, even His claim as the Messiah, yet they had not believed. But notice the key word, received in this event. This word indicates more than knowledge; it indicates acceptance and belief of Peter’s words. They responded in obedience and at that point were added to the kingdom and began their journey to spiritual maturity.

Related to the misconception of time and knowledge indicating spiritual maturity is the misconception that spiritual maturity is based on how active one is in the church.
We must not and cannot trust in our abilities and amount of work to justify us before our Lord (Matthew 7:21). Someone once said that we work because of our salvation, not for it. Busyness does not necessarily bring maturity; it may in fact hinder it. We might hear someone say, “Look what I’ve done!” Or, “I’ve earned favor with God since I’ve done so much good.” Or, “I’m just too busy to get involved.”

Our Lord told another parable found in Luke 12:13-21 that we know as the “Parable of the Rich Fool.” In this parable a man experienced a plentiful harvest, so much so that he planned to tear down his barns and build bigger ones to hold the crop. The problem was that the man put reliance on his own works and not to the glory of God. Our Lord concluded the parable with a clear warning in verse 21, “So is the one who lays up treasure for himself and is not rich toward God.” We recognize also these words introduced to us in Matthew 6:19-21 where our Lord instructs us to lay up treasures in heaven, not the physical treasures we come to trust in life.

Growing to spiritual maturity is not about how often someone goes to church, how much involved a person is in various ministries, or whether or not one is in charge of a program. These are important, but they are not true measures of spiritual maturity. Spiritual maturity is seen in how much like Christ someone is in all aspects of their life.

Becoming spiritually mature is a critical requirement of Christians. The journey to spiritual maturity begins in earnest when we obey the Lord. It is at that moment that we are “babes in Christ.” Just as a baby craves physical nourishment to grow, spiritual babes should hunger for God’s Word so they also can grow spiritually. Spiritual growth requires emphasis in three areas:

**COOL DOWN**

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• Growing in our understanding of what it means to be a Christian;
• Expanding our personal knowledge of biblical truth;
• Putting into practice daily what we learn.

Discussion Questions

1. If you divided your “normal day” into thirds, are you comfortable with how much time you spend focusing on each category of growth? What can you do to bring balance in your life to these three critical areas of development?
   • Physical
   • Intellectual
   • Spiritual

2. We’ve discussed several misunderstandings associated with spiritual maturity. Have you ever experienced or believed in one or more these? If so, have you changed your perspective of the misunderstanding and why?

3. Explain how knowledge or lack of knowledge of God’s Word can be a barrier to spiritual growth.