

## Growth Oriented

If there is one thing I can confidently say is God's will for you and me, and one of our greatest needs, it that we grow spiritually. Advent is a great season to think about this. Advent marks the lead-up to the celebration of the birth of Christ, the incarnation of God the Son. In **John 8:12**, Jesus said, *"I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness but will have the light of life."* Later in that same chapter, we come to a verse we looked at last week. **John 8:31-32** where Jesus says *if you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.* The advent season, is a great season to continue to reflect on our discipleship. Are we following him and walking in the light?

This advent season we are continuing the seven facets of discipleship and hopefully seeing their relationship to the coming of Christ. The first two facets are the *"Upward Look"* a disciple of Jesus is 1<sup>st</sup> *Focused on God* and 2<sup>nd</sup> *Fulfilled in Christ*. Then there is an *"Inward Look,"* a disciple of Jesus is 3<sup>rd</sup> *Biblically Integrated*. And today, 4<sup>th</sup>, a disciple of Jesus is *Growth Oriented*. The word *oriented* means to be directed toward a particular goal. Jesus often used the imagery of growing and fruitfulness. In the verses we read this morning, the apostle Peter uses the imagery of a growing child. **1 Peter 2:2-3** says, *Like newborn infants, long for the pure spiritual milk, that by it you may grow up into salvation 3 if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good. So a disciple of Jesus is directed toward a life of ongoing spiritual growth.*

### I. THE LIFE OF A DISCIPLE OF JESUS BEGINS WITH A SPIRITUAL REBIRTH THAT ENABLES LIFE LONG GROWTH.

**1 Peter 1:22-23** *Having purified your souls by your obedience to the truth for a sincere brotherly love, love one another earnestly from a pure heart, 23 since you have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God*

## **A. Spiritual growth in our discipleship requires a new birth.**

In **John 3**, there's the story of Nicodemus, an upstanding religious leader who seems to have it together. Jesus intrigues him. He comes and says, *"I'm not sure I understand all that you are saying."* In **John 3:7**, Jesus says, *Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.'* Sometimes I wonder. How many people who visit here on a weekend or watch online are like Nicodemus, curious, but not yet spiritually alive? Would you hear what Jesus says: *"You must be born again."* You need to ask God to give you what only he can give - a new birth, a new spiritual life that can begin to develop and grow.

I once read about a man who had orange trees on his property that bore sour fruit. So he cut them off low and grafted a new variety of orange into the stumps of the old trees. This is apparently a common practice with citrus trees. That new stock grafted into the old tree allowed it to bear sweeter fruit. Jesus said something like this has to happen in our lives to open us up for a relationship with God and to enable us to bear good fruit - like sincere love - in life. God grafts new life into your old self. The more skeptical and secular our world becomes, the more crucial it is for us to hold on to spiritual reality that was part of Jesus' teachings - the reality of being born again spiritually.

## **B. No matter how together things look on the outside we are all in need of this on the inside.**

Jesus touched the lives of people as diverse as Nicodemus, who was religious and had a good reputation, and also people like Mary Magdalene, who had a sketchy past in that seven demons were cast out of her. Nicodemus and Mary needed new life and so do we all. Sin isn't just what we do outward. It is deeper. *It's the fact that instead of gratefully receiving our identity in relationship to God, we want to be our little gods. You try to act as your own judge, and live for your own glory and even be your own savior. You call the shots, you run your life, you decide what's right or wrong and what matters most.* You can't deal with that deep ego-centered self-protective root by covering over it with a veneer of church attendance and a few rules for the road. So with Jesus, it doesn't matter whether he meets a Mary Magdalene or a

Nicodemus or you and me. He tells us all, *“You have to be born again!”*

You look at two people, and one person is obviously sick, shaking, and sweating with a high fever. Another person may look fine and be caring for the one who is obviously sick. The person who looks sick might be better tomorrow, and the person who looks fine might have an undetected tumor that is far more dangerous. Who has the more serious problem? Mary Magdalene had seven demons and a shady reputation, but maybe she's like the person with the raging fever that's about to break and pass. Nicodemus, who is living with a false peace and a silent self-righteousness, looked fine on the outside but wasn't. The humbling but encouraging answer Jesus gives is they both have the same need, and it's what we need too. *“You must be born again.”*

### **C. So you have to ask yourself if you have been born again.**

*This passage in 1 Peter suggests three diagnostic questions.*

**1. First, Have you received and obeyed the gospel?** At the beginning of this passage, Peter talks about obeying the truth. Then he talks about the Word of God leading up to **verse 25**, where he says, *“this word is the good news that was preached to you.”* The word "good news" is the word "gospel." This is the message angels proclaimed to the shepherds in Bethlehem. They said, *We bring you good news of great joy. For unto you there is born this day, in the city of David, a Savior who is Christ the Lord.* The gospel is the good news that Christ came into our world, and was crucified to pay for our sins he received the vindication of God in his resurrection, and is enthroned as Lord and Savior. Peter talks about *obeying* the gospel because the gospel calls us all to repent and return to God through faith in Jesus so we can be saved, not by our works but by God's grace.

*Have you obeyed the truth and placed your faith in Jesus?*

**2. Second, Do you want to learn to live a life of love?** Look at **1 Peter 2:3**. It says, *love one another earnestly from the heart, since you have been born again.* There is an especially intimate relationship between spiritual life and love in Scripture. Toward the end of the Bible, the little book of 1<sup>st</sup> John uses the word love in 26 verses. It says the ultimate test of the reality of spiritual life is love. When I first

became a Christian I had *many* sins and habits that needed to change. But the first change those closest to me noticed, especially my mother, was a growing care, empathy, and affection for the father from whom I had been distanced by my pride and hardness. I saw him with new eyes and loved him. Where did that come from? It didn't come from me but from God. I still deeply need and hope to learn to grow more and more in true and Christ like love.

*Have you received the gospel, and do you want to learn to love?*

**3. Third, Have you tasted that the Lord is good?** Peter talks about that in **1 Peter 2:3**, - *if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good.* Many people want a taste of everything they think might be good in life, and God doesn't even make their list. The new birth changes that. This is talking about a sense of and ongoing desire for the nourishing goodness of God that makes an impression on your heart. You come alive to the beauty and the goodness of God. These are good questions to ask: 1.) *Have I received and obeyed the gospel?* 2.) *Do I want to learn to live a life of love?* 3.) *Have I tasted that the Lord is good?*

*You have to start there. Spiritual growth begins with spiritual birth.*

## **II. THE LIFE OF A DISCIPLE OF JESUS CALLS FOR A LIFETIME OF PURSUING SPIRITUAL GROWTH.**

**1 Peter 2:1-2** says, *put away all malice and all deceit and hypocrisy and envy and all slander. 2 Like newborn infants, long for the pure spiritual milk, that by it you may grow up into salvation.*

### **A. Discipleship involves growing up spiritually and growing is a life-long process that is different for everyone.**

We are mistaken if we think the new birth leads to instantaneous or easy transformation. It does not. Look at the disciples of Jesus in Scripture. There is a growth process. Every now and then, you hear one of those stories of someone that lit up a joint, or did whatever is their drug of choice, opened a bottle of whiskey, and started planning some devious crime but then watched a Christian YouTube episode, invited Jesus into their life and from that moment on lived like a saint.

Those stories, even when credible, are unusual. The new birth is a beginning. It's just a beginning. Peter has to exhort these people to love and grow. It is not as if being born again ends everything. It's a beginning. A disciple of Jesus, having been born again, needs to grow.

It is critical to realize how much disciples of Jesus need to grow. We hear people talking about the idea of deconstructing their faith. Which often means turning away from the Christian faith. From what I have seen, it is almost never because someone who used to believe in the resurrection of Jesus has become intellectually convinced that it never happened. It is more often that someone has been disappointed by Christians they know or even by themselves. So the question that comes up is this: If Christians are supposed to be followers of Jesus, why is it that some non-Christians are nicer than some of the Christians. Why are so many Christians not all that great? If true Christians are people who have been born again, shouldn't they be the nicest people around? Someone says, *"My stepfather, who is not a Christian, is a nicer guy than my Dad, who's always at church!"* Or, *"I dated two guys who were Christians, and they were a huge disappointment. The guy I'm seeing now is not a Christian, and he is awesome. What's with that?"*

In his book *Mere Christianity*, C. S. Lewis has a chapter on this titled *"Nice People Or New Men."* He says: If Christianity is true (if a person is born again), then it ought to follow that such a person 1.) will be nicer than the same person would have been if they were not a Christian and 2.) that they will grow to be better than they were before. 3.) It does not necessarily follow that they will be nicer than some other person if that person were not a Christian. Imagine that at your workplace, there is a man who is an outspoken Christian, but he is abrasive, easily offended, and often moody, driven in his work, and short with those who work with him. Then there is a woman who doesn't claim to believe in God at all, but she is gentle and nurturing. Someone says, See, if Christ changes lives, why isn't the Christian nicer than the non-Christian? But think about it, that by itself doesn't tell you whether Christ changes lives or if the new birth is real. The question is, what would that Christian man be like if he were not a Christian? Maybe he would not only be a bit aggravating or abrasive, but maybe he would be an embezzler or a predator. What would that

non-believing woman be like if she was a Christian? Both of these individuals have a temperament; they have certain genetics, a background, and the family environment in which they were raised. They have good or bad habits they have developed as well. The new birth imparts new life, but the old self does not just immediately disappear. God goes to work to change you from the inside, and it is a process. It's often slow and sometimes painful. Didn't Jesus say, *take up your cross and follow me*? True discipleship requires an ongoing surrender to that process of growth. That humble persistence in a life of faith and ongoing growth is precious to God.

## **B. Growing is a process, and you have to go after it.**

*Here are three things to do from 1 Peter.*

**1. First of all, set your sights high and have faith!** Peter tell us to love earnestly from a pure heart and to long for spiritual milk so as to grow. When we come to Christ, we come with our hang-ups, our hurts, our genetics, and our temperaments. We are foolish to think none of that matters, but we are weak in faith if we think those issues can hold us in bondage! The gift of new life means we *can* grow and change. Peter is a great example of this, follow his story through the Scriptures, and you will see a man who over time grows and changes because of the life of God within him. Don't beat yourself up because you struggle but don't settle for staying stuck either. Discipleship requires a willingness to face the need to change, to take stock, and to press on. We need to want to grow more than to be comfortable.

**Philippians 3:13-15** says maturity means pressing on. Paul said, *Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own.* (He's talking about attaining perfection) *But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, <sup>14</sup> I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. <sup>15</sup> Let those of us who are mature think this way, and if in anything you think otherwise, God will reveal that also to you.* We tend to think maturity is the goal. He says spiritual maturity in this life is realizing you haven't yet achieved the goal of Christlikeness, so you keep forgetting what is behind and pressing on. That's what it means to be "growth-oriented."

*Set your sights high and press on...*

**2. Second, nourish the new life with God's word.** In **verse 24**, Peter quotes the prophet Isaiah (Isaiah 40:6-8) *"All flesh is like grass and all its glory like the flower of grass. The grass withers and the flower falls, 25 but the word of the Lord remains forever."* And this word is the good news that was preached to you. His point is that everything in creation is temporary, but the word of God, and the things God says, are eternal and powerful. This all lead up to chapter **2:1-2**, where he says, *Like newborn infants, long for the pure spiritual milk, that by it you may grow up into salvation.* This is what we looked at last week! A disciple of Jesus is Biblically integrated. You nourish spiritual growth when you let the Scriptures go deep and change forever not only what you think but also what you treasure. Reflect on its teachings, take it to heart, memorize its promises and live by its wisdom and precepts.

**3. Third, make the daily choice to put away all the things that hinder spiritual growth.** In **1 Peter 2:1**, He says, *So put away all malice and all deceit and hypocrisy and envy and all slander.*

- *Malice* is a wide-ranging word used for all kinds of evil but it gets at the idea that it begins with ungodly and unhealthy intentions.
- *Deceit* is the opposite of truthfulness and honesty.
- *Hypocrisy* is putting on a mask playing a role that inconsistent with who you really are.
- *Envy* is spite and resentment over the success or blessings of others.
- *Slander*, is spreading falsehoods that damage a person's reputation.

He's saying put away everything that holds you back so that you can grow. But it is interesting because so many of these things are not superficial or merely outward things but things attached to deeper feelings and reactions to circumstances and relationships with people. Often it is in the tests, the conflicts, the relational tensions, pressures, and stresses of life that these ungodly responses surface. To be a growth-oriented disciple of Jesus is to deal with these things over and over again. So faith, patience, and the long walk of lifelong discipleship are needed.

When I told you about the man who grafted the sweet citrus into the

sour root stock, one thing I didn't mention is that he said after the new growth was grafted in, he had to watch those trees because there would constantly be branches cropping out from below the graft line. He had to watch for that and cut them off. That's a helpful image. God grafts new life into your soul that can bear better fruit. Then we, thankful for his grace at work in us, work at cutting away all the old growth whenever it shows up.

## CONCLUSION

But here's the thing, the way you put these things away to pursue growth is not just by raw will power. God is at work within you and with you. You live in light of the grace of gospel and the gift of the new birth.

So when hard feelings come up, you don't just grit your teeth and say, *"I will not be malicious or slander another person."* You think, *"God loved me when I was so wrong and selfish and sinful. He's brought me to life through the gospel. How can I hold onto bitter feelings or a desire to hurt anyone?"* *"If God loves me like he does, and Christ gave himself for my redemption, I'm rich enough and secure enough to take this hurt and respond with kindness and obedience to God."*

You don't see what others have and just grit your teeth and say, *"I must not envy."* You do say that, but not *just* that! In the same breath, you remind yourself, *"If God gave his Son for me, how will he not also with him give me everything I need to live a fulfilled life?"* If he loves me and is my father in heaven, I can trust him to provide everything I need.

You have the love of God, and the gift of eternal life, so you can afford to be sweeter and more sacrificial, and you can grow up into the full experience of the salvation he has graciously given you. Believe that. Be focused on God, fulfilled in Christ, Biblically integrated, and growth-oriented. Keep growing.

**Amen.**

**A Prayer Expressing Faith In Christ**



Almighty God, You have beautifully revealed your love in Jesus whose body was broken, whose blood was shed for our salvation. I confess my sins and admit my need for your saving grace. I have gone my own way, disbelieving and disobeying your Word. I turn to Christ. I trust in him for my redemption. I believe he died on the cross to pay for my sins and rose again as Lord and Savior. I receive and rest on him alone for my salvation. Grant me the eternal life promised in your Word to all who come to him in faith. In Jesus' name, Amen.

### **A Prayer for Spiritual Renewal**

Lord Jesus, May I grow to increasingly embrace the wisdom you reveal, trust the promises you have made and do those things that you command. May I treasure the spiritual life you have given to me through the gift of renewal and new birth. Help me to put off the old self and its unhealthy habits in order to earnestly pursue a life of ongoing spiritual growth in the grace and in knowledge of my Lord and Savior Jesus. In whose Name I pray, Amen