

Growing in Christ

Scripture: 2 Peter 1:5-11

“Do your best to improve your faith. You can do this by adding goodness, understanding, self-control, patience, devotion to God, concern for others, and love. If you keep growing in this way, it will show that what you know about our Lord Jesus Christ has made your lives useful and meaningful. But if you don't grow, you are like someone who is nearsighted or blind, and you have forgotten that your past sins are forgiven. My friends, you must do all you can to show that God has really chosen and selected you. If you keep on doing this, you won't stumble and fall. Then our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ will give you a glorious welcome into his kingdom that will last forever.”

It seems like all the messages you hear from this pulpit these days are related to each other in some way – they're all about being a transformational community. A few months ago I was reading a book for one of my correspondence courses called *Exploring our Christian Faith* (edited by W. T. Purkiser) that had some thoughts on ways we grow as Christians. I really liked what I read and I wanted to share these things the next time I preached. As I've been getting this message ready, I realized that I'm just talking about some of the same things everyone else has been preaching about, with maybe a different perspective. I think God is trying to tell us something.

As I was working on this message, I thought I would do something I've never done before – create an acronym. As many of you know, an acronym is a word made by using the first letter or letters of a series of words, and sometimes it's easier to remember a list of words or steps if you have an acronym to remind you about it. So we've been talking about being a transformational community, but I realized it wouldn't work to use the word “transformation” – it has 14 letters, so you'd have to remember 14 words, which would be harder to remember than the word “transformation” itself. Then I thought of several words that all began with “s,” but then realized that you might remember the letter “s,” but would have a hard time remembering a bunch of words that all began with “s.” After creating a bunch of nonsense words, I found a way to spell “growth” with six words – some I had to tweak a bit to make it work. But maybe you'll remember my message today if you think of the word “growth.”

I feel like I'm just going to scratch the surface – a whole message could be preached on each one of these words, but I'm going to try to give a broad overview today. Also, this is not an all-exhaustive study on how we grow – I'll just be talking about some ways God brings about transformation in our character.

Growth is natural. Physically, we grow and change. We think it's cute for babies to talk baby talk, but if they do it at age 10, something is seriously wrong. What is normal at a young age becomes unnatural and undesirable at an older age. So growth and maturity is normal. It's normal not only physically, but spiritually as well. The scripture that was read from 2 Peter says that as we grow, our lives will be more meaningful and useful in our knowledge of Jesus, but if we don't grow, we are nearsighted or blind, forgetting that our past sins are forgiven. We should be growing.

Have you ever been around someone who just seems to ooze Jesus out of their pores? There are a few people that I feel are so much like Jesus that I just want to be around them. It's not anything they particularly do – it's just who they are. I've always wanted to be like that – to be so full of Jesus that people can just sense His presence in my life. Growing in our Christian walk means growing to be more like Christ.

But when I look at myself, I fall so short of that goal. God has so much work to do in me. I think we all feel that way, if we are really honest with ourselves. We respond in wrong ways and find ourselves not always doing what we know God wants us to do. We want to change and do better, because we don't like to see the way we are.

But the problem is that change is hard – Kelly talked last week about how God often uses people around us to cause us to grow, giving us lots of practice in responding to each other with the attitude of Christ. The process of change can feel as bad as or worse than the condition we are in. Sometimes that's simply because change is painful. But sometimes the things God has to do to show us our hearts is really painful because we're so blind to what our problem really is. And sometimes bringing about the change is painful because we're so set in our ways, and we don't realize that we don't actually want to change.

It's interesting to me that the last two in the list of character qualities in 2 Peter are “concern for others” and “love.” We can't really love each other in Christian community unless we allow God to change us and help us grow.

The first step to growing in Christ is simply to be born into His family. Jesus told Nicodemus in John 3:3 that he had to be “born again.” Being born again, or becoming a Christian, simply means making God the boss of your life. Yes, it involves believing in Him, but it also means a choice to give Him every area of your life and committing yourself to obeying Him in all those areas. So for the “G” you can put “Give yourself fully to God.” Acts 16:31 says in the Amplified Bible, “Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ [give yourself up to Him, take yourself out of your own keeping and entrust yourself into His keeping] and you will be saved.” Sometimes people start to come to church and they see a much better way to live and they want to do the same. So they may try to straighten out their lives and make better choices, and a lot of things may improve. But as time goes on, they find that they struggle to really live the Christian life – some outward ways of living may have gotten better, but they still struggle with many other areas. They don't really feel close to God and they wonder if He is even there. But you can't grow spiritually if you haven't even been born into God's family yet. So if you haven't given your life to Him, I encourage you to do that this morning, and not just try in your own strength to live the Christian life.

So once we are born into God's family, how do we grow spiritually? A baby doesn't grow unless it has food, warmth, and nurture. In the same way, there are specific things that help us to grow spiritually. Before Kelly left on his sabbatical, he spoke a message on one way that we grow and mature called “spiritual disciplines.” Spiritual disciplines are those things that we often think of when we get asked the question: “How do you grow in Christ?” We know that reading our Bibles, praying, worship, fasting, and things like that will help us to grow. Pastor Tonie Gatlin talked a few weeks ago about the importance of having the Word of God in us so

that throughout the day, we will more automatically respond the way God wants us to. When we've spent time with Him in the morning, often we are more sensitive to His involvement and guidance in our every moment during the day. There are many different activities that can be considered spiritual disciplines, and you can get whole books on ways to actively pursue growth in our lives. So for the "r" in "growth" you can write "Read your Bible and pray." 1 Peter 2:2 talks about how reading the Word helps us to grow: "As newborn babes, desire the pure milk of the word, that you may grow thereby." Bible reading and prayer are not the only spiritual disciplines, but they are the most obvious ones, the ones everyone thinks of, so this letter can remind you of spiritual disciplines.

Why do spiritual disciplines help us grow? It's because of a simple truth that we see in all relationships. The foundation of our Christianity is having a relationship with God. We grow in Him as we grow closer to Him. And the way we grow closer to Him is by spending time with Him. In the same way, we grow in relationships with other people when we spend time together – the kind of time that's not just being in the same room as someone. It doesn't always have to be super deep, but it's being together, being real, enjoying things together, and sometimes being brutally honest and opening up about ourselves. That's how we grow closer to a friend or spouse; it's also how we naturally grow closer to God.

So I'm not talking about just gaining knowledge about God. We don't read our Bibles so we can have perfect doctrine, or be able to show off how much we know. We spend time with God so we can know Him better. Knowing God's Word helps us know what God says, how He thinks, and what He is like. That in turn helps us think the same way and makes us more spiritually alert and able to make right choices. As we pray, we are talking with God, not just talking to Him. He speaks to us through His Word, and sometimes just personally as we wait on Him. Worship helps us to focus on who God is and understand Him in a personal way. Fasting helps us die to our physical desires and become more alert to spiritual things and able to hear from God more.

There are times in my life when I have memorized a lot of Scripture, and those verses have stayed with me till this day. I may forget exactly where to find them, but when I need them, they come to mind and it doesn't take long to find them. When I had my brain surgery, I went over Psalm 91 in my mind, and it comforted me so much they didn't have to give me calming medication before they wheeled me into the operation room. I find that when I have spent time in prayer and Bible meditation, I am so much calmer and more sensitive to the Lord throughout the day. So these spiritual disciplines are not just duties to fulfill that will somehow make God love us more or make us "better" Christians – they help us to draw near to God, to become more sensitive to Him, and to learn to hear His voice more.

But there are also other ways that we grow. Spiritual disciplines focus on us doing positive actions. Another way to grow is by not doing something – not giving in to temptation. We grow in the Lord by continued resisting of temptation. The "o" in the word "growth" stands for "Overcome temptation."

1 Corinthians 10:13 says "No temptation has overtaken you but such as is common to man; and God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will provide the way of escape also, so that you will be able to endure it."

Sometimes when we are tempted we feel like we are getting nowhere at all. When we struggle with the same old thing, sometimes failing, we look at our failures or just the fact that we struggle with it still and think we are as bad off as we have ever been, if not worse. But it's kind of like someone who works out and gets stronger muscles than they had before. During the workout, especially at first, it doesn't feel too great, but in time, those muscles are developed by their constant use and exercise. (I can't say I know this by experience, but I've heard that it's like that.)

When Kelly began his backpacking trip, he couldn't go that far at first – that is, relatively speaking – it seemed pretty far to me! Part of that was the incredibly hot weather he was experiencing, but it wasn't easy walking 15-20 miles a day. But he began walking farther and farther each day. By the middle of the trip when I went down to visit him, he arrived a couple of days earlier to our meeting point and had to hang out at his parents' house and wait for me because I couldn't change my flight. In the end, he ended up coming home a whole week early because he began being able to walk more and more each day. He challenged his body to work hard, and he grew stronger and stronger. In the same way we grow spiritual “muscles” by resisting temptation.

Temptations come in many ways. Sometimes we just think of being tempted to do something that is obviously wrong, like going out and partying, doing drugs, or whatever. But sometimes it's less obvious, like when we are tempted to feel sorry for ourselves, or to be self-centered, or to hold onto a grudge when we have been wronged. Or it can be more subtle – spiritual pride, spiritual ambition, or even spiritual discouragement. While you may be struggling and dealing with these things, it may seem like nothing is getting better, but your resistance to follow your own desires is strengthening your spiritual muscles and causing you to grow strong in the Lord. Satan wants you to become discouraged because you are dealing with temptation, but just the fact that you are struggling and not just giving in without thinking about it shows that you have a desire for God and for righteousness.

If you never do anything to exercise your physical muscles, you become flabby and unfit. In the same way, if it is always easy to do the right thing, we become lazy and comfortable in our Christian walk. It's easy to be kind and loving when you feel good, but it takes a lot more character and strength to be kind when you feel kind of grouchy. The strange thing is that when we feel bad, we think something's wrong, but that is the time when our actions can actually reveal how much we are really growing. Bad feelings or temptations aren't necessarily a sign of immaturity; every time we make a right choice when we feel crummy is a cause for rejoicing!

So we grow by doing some things (the positive side) and not doing others (the negative side), but there's a third way that God causes to grow. This is what I consider the most difficult way to grow. “W” stands for “Walk through the wilderness.”

Sometimes we grow in the Lord by going through the wilderness, a word which is also translated “desert” many times. The wilderness speaks of dryness, difficult times, pain and suffering. It is not a nice place to be! The Children of Israel were in the wilderness 40 years, and it's not generally considered a time of great victory and rejoicing, but a time of struggle and difficulty.

I want to look at some verses in Hosea 2 that speak about being in the wilderness. In verse 14 God says, "Therefore, behold, I will allure her, bring her into the wilderness and speak kindly to her." What does "allure" mean? It means "to attract with something desirable." We don't really think of the wilderness as being something positive, something to be "allured" into. Why on earth would God use that word to speak of bringing us into the wilderness when the wilderness is the hardest place to be? We don't exactly feel like the wilderness is something desirable!

I think the answer lies in what follows. God brings beauty into our lives in the wilderness. Let's continue reading:

In verse 15, God says, "There I will give her back her vineyards, and will make the Valley of Achor a door of hope." "Achor" means trouble. How many of you here are looking for trouble? Do you wake up in the morning and think, "I wonder how trouble will come to me today. I can't wait to find out!" No, we do all we can to avoid trouble. It's not human nature to look for hard things to experience. We spend half our time trying to get out of any situation that will be hard. But this says the valley of Achor will become the door of hope. How many of you like the idea of hope? Hope is a very positive word. Without hope, we lose the will to live. Without hope, we have nothing good to look forward to. Without hope, we are hopeless. Hopelessness has caused many people to commit suicide, because they see no possible way for things to change.

So God says in the wilderness we will find hope.

Then He says in verse 16, "In that day you will call me 'my husband'; you will no longer call me 'my master.'" This, I think, is the main reason that God allures us into the wilderness. He wants us to see Him as not our task master, but as intimate as a husband. God desires to be in a love relationship with us. He created us because of love, and He longs for intimacy with us.

Do you see God mainly as your master? Yes, He is the Lord. He is the God of all and deserves our complete submission to Him as our Lord and Master. But He is more than that. God is love, and He wants you to know His love. He doesn't want you to serve Him out of fear or duty; He wants your heart. He wants you to do the right things because you love Him and are responding to His love, not because you are trying to make Him love you.

So in the wilderness we grow in intimacy with God.

Then in verse 17, God says, "I will remove the names of the Baals from her lips; no longer will their names be invoked." This speaks of getting rid of false gods, or anything that is more important than God in our lives. When we put anything before God, that's having an idol in our lives. Sometimes we just get caught up in living, and don't realize how important other things have become in the midst of all the busyness. God takes that time in the wilderness to help us to see what is happening – to get His perspective – and to lay down anything that stands in between us and Him.

Hosea 2 goes on with more things that God would do in the wilderness for Israel. The context here was a time when Israel, the northern kingdom, had turned away from God and Hosea was prophesying what would happen to them – going into exile – in order that their hearts would turn

back to God. But this doesn't just apply to Israel in the wilderness – God knows that sometimes for all of us it's not until we get in the wilderness that we will come to our senses. He doesn't have to create the wilderness – we sometimes put ourselves there, sometimes other people's choices cause us to be in a wilderness, and sometimes bad things just happen because we live in a sinful world. But God uses all those things for good in our lives.

How does He do all this in the wilderness? One thing that happens is that we get more desperate for Him. We cling to Him, because we desperately need something to hold on to when life gets so hard. And I believe that He delights in having us reach out to Him in this way. We get so caught up with many things, and often He is crowded out of our lives. But when we are holding on to Him for dear life, He feels the sweetness of our presence, and He rejoices in our love. God loves you and He wants to be close to you!

We also read in Jeremiah 2:1, 2 – “The word of the LORD came to me: “Go and proclaim in the hearing of Jerusalem: ‘I remember the devotion of your youth, how as a bride you loved me and followed me through the desert, through a land not sown.’” God saw Israel as a bride who loved Him when she was in the desert. In the desert Israel had to depend on God. They had no other way to survive, so they clung to Him, even in the midst of their struggles. God rejoices when we are clinging to Him because He loves us so much and wants us to be with Him.

Some people go through hard times, and they grow hard and bitter. Others go through difficulties and they just become more and more like Jesus – like the kind of person I was talking about at the beginning. What makes the difference? It's how you respond to what God wants to do in you. This brings us to the letter “t,” which stands for “Trust.” Prov. 3:5, 6 says, “Trust in the LORD with all your heart and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge Him, and He will make your paths straight.”

We need to live with an attitude of trust. That doesn't mean you pretend you're not having emotions. Sometimes you may need to let it all out. There have been times when I've been hurting and just needed to yell at God for awhile. I always go out in the car to do that, usually parked somewhere so I don't waste gas, so no one can hear me. I tell Him exactly how I feel – sometimes very loudly. So if you see me sitting at the side of the road somewhere by myself in the car, you may want to leave me alone!

In the midst of our pain, we need to have an attitude of coming to Him, not turning away from Him and resisting His work in our lives. It may be that something totally unfair is happening, or something where you feel you deserve to hold a grudge. Will you submit more fully to God and trust that He is working in you? It may be that you have angry feelings and need to express (or yell) them to God. But in the midst of the honest feelings, we need to have an underlying sense of yielding to Him, of looking to Him for help. He'll take us in our painful, mixed-up state and bring about His character in our lives with a greater sense of peace and joy.

Everyone needs to grow and mature, whether you've been a Christian all your life, or just gave your life to the Lord yesterday. Whenever you start, you should be growing and continue growing. Growth is normal. Today I want to encourage you to grow in the Lord. This brings us to the last letter in the word “growth.” “H” stands for “Hang on.” This speaks of persevering.

Almost anyone can do the right thing for one minute, or five minutes, or maybe a whole day. But growth will only come if you keep on keeping on. You're in it for the long haul – "The one who has endured till the end...will be saved" (Matt. 10:22).

Sometimes you will mess up – no one can be perfect all the time. Satan will try to discourage you when you fall and make you think you'll never make it. But Proverbs 24:16a says: "for though a righteous man falls seven times, he rises again." Notice it doesn't say for though a "sinner" falls – it says a "righteous man." Even righteous people fall at times! And the idea here isn't that we should only let ourselves fall 7 times, and after that give up, but there's a feeling of getting up no matter how many times you fall.

Sometimes all you literally feel you can do is "hang on." So hang on with all your might. Don't give up and don't stop persevering. God will get you through. And sometimes the sweetest sense of His presence may come in the midst of one of your most difficult times.

(Review all 6 words.)

I want to finish by reading some final verses from Hosea 2, verses 19-20, 23: "I will betroth you to Me forever; yes, I will betroth you to Me in righteousness and in justice, in lovingkindness and in compassion, and I will betroth you to Me in faithfulness. Then you will know the LORD... I will also have compassion on her who had not obtained compassion, and I will say to those who were not My people, 'You are My people!' and they will say, 'You are my God!'"

Do you hear the longing in God's heart for you? That's what growth is all about – growing close to Him. I encourage you to give your life fully to Him, practice spiritual disciplines by reading your Bible and spending time with Him, overcome temptation by continuing to resist it, and keep walking when you go through the wilderness. Through it all, have an attitude of trust – don't fight what He is doing in you. And hold on to Him, persevering and not giving up until you see Him face to face. You will grow closer to Him, you will become more like Him, and He will help you through whatever you face.