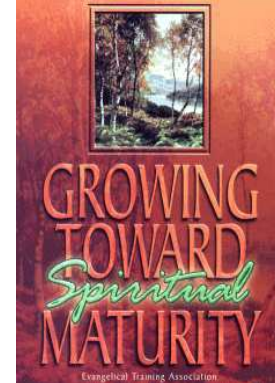


# The Dynamics of Spiritual Growth

Chapter 1 of *Growing Toward Spiritual Maturity*

A strategy for growing toward Christ-likeness must be based on the actual ways that people grow and develop spiritually. By identifying and understanding how we spiritually mature, we become more intentional in our use of time and methods. Understanding the dynamics of spiritual growth makes us more aware of how God uses the specific circumstances of our lives to draw us closer to Him. In this first chapter we will identify eight principles of spiritual growth. Each principle helps us unravel God's mystery of transforming sinful, rebellious people into godly, passionate lovers of His Son, Jesus. Each of these principles is grounded both in Scripture and in common experience.



## 1. God is ultimately responsible for all spiritual growth

There is a dangerous tendency within this sophisticated, technological culture to attribute spiritual “success stories” to clever human strategies, wise choices, or determined hard work. Without downplaying the importance of human responsibility in spiritual growth, God's role must always be central.

This principle shines forth clearly in Isaiah 61:11, where the prophet Isaiah compares God's role in dealing with His people to the role of garden soil in causing seeds to grow. God plays the role of a seasoned farmer carefully preparing the soil and maintaining the garden with the vision to see each seed grow into maturity.

This principle is also clearly illustrated in the New Testament. When Paul saw the early church members focusing too much on the role of human leaders, he reminded them that God is the person primarily responsible for growth. The picture in 1 Corinthians 3:7–9 is also of a garden. There are many servants helping the Gardener (God) grow His seeds, yet it is the Gardener who causes the growth. The Christian's attitude toward growth should always give tribute for the growth to God. Paul teaches, in 1 Corinthians 15:10 that everything the Christian becomes or accomplishes for the kingdom of God is only because of God's grace and power.

We are saved by grace because of what God did rather than anything we could contribute. Yet it seems to be more difficult for Christians to believe their continued spiritual growth is dependent on God. A subtle legalism often creeps into our lives which equates our spiritual growth with the disciplines we exercise. Paul challenges the Christians of his time with a message relevant for us today, “Are you so foolish? After beginning with the Spirit, are you now trying to attain your goal by human effort?” (Gal. 3:3).

God is ultimately responsible for the growth process in our lives from beginning to end. He chose before the world was created to make us a part of His garden, where we could grow into the holy likeness of His Son, Jesus (Eph. 1:4). His plan was not to only save us, as important as that transformational experience is, but rather to continue to nurture us into His likeness.

His role as the Gardener is not finished when the seed takes root. Rather, His role in our spiritual development has just begun.

The Holy Spirit works as a supernatural catalyst throughout our life. He first brings us into a personal relationship with Jesus and then molds us into His likeness. “He who began a good work in you will carry it to completion until the day of Christ Jesus” (Phil. 1:6). God is ultimately responsible for all spiritual growth in the believer’s life.

## **2. Effort, diligence, and discipline are absolutely necessary for growth**

If God is responsible for our growth, can we simply bask in the glory of His grace, waiting for Him to propel us into His orbit of holiness and bliss? Paradoxically, God’s complete provision for our growth is not undercut by the necessity of our effort and discipline. In fact, Scripture seems to suggest that our diligence is essential to the growth process. In 2 Peter 1:1–11, we learn God is both the source and dynamo for godly living. Additionally we are challenged to “make every effort” to build on what God has given. God’s provision for our growth becomes the *reason* why we should diligently work toward Christ-like qualities. While God supplies the resources and enablement for our growth, we must supply the effort.

Paul also emphasizes this principle in both his personal lifestyle and teachings. He often uses the example of a soldier or athlete to illustrate the amount of discipline and hard work required to be successful. In 1 Corinthians 9:24–27, Paul states that “in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize.” He then goes on to challenge his readers to run the Christian race in such a way as to get the prize. This demands strict training, much like the focus of today’s Olympic games. Concluding with an example from his own life, Paul says that he “beats” (meaning “to conquer”; see Rom. 8:13) his body to keep it submissive to God’s will for his life. His training plan is not sporadic, like a man beating the air, but it is intentional and deliberate. In order to grow into a mature woman or man of God, the believer must be a part of a diligent training plan for growth (1 Tim. 4:7–8). We can learn a great deal about growing toward Christian maturity from both the example and teaching of a godly man like Paul.

This close relationship between God’s provision for our growth and our active involvement in the process is nowhere clearer than in Philippians 2:12–13: “Continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose.” The mystery of this principle may be hard to grasp, but the implication is clear. If Christians are to grow toward maturity in Christ, they must demonstrate their passion to grow by obedient action.

## **3. Spiritual growth potential may not be easy to see at first**

Anyone who has ever worked with junior high students knows that it is dangerous to predetermine who will become the Christian leaders of the future. I have seen some of the most athletic, popular, and brilliant students fail miserably in their Christian walk, and I have also seen some of the most unlikely students blossom into Christian giants. God’s criteria for success is different than our own.

As we evaluate our lives, we must be careful not to underestimate what God can do in and through us. Rather than compare ourselves to spiritual giants at the end of their pilgrimages, we would be wiser to acknowledge where those people began their walk with God. When Samuel was looking for God's choice to replace Saul as king of Israel, he was tempted to choose David's older brother, Eliab. However, God rebuked Samuel for his lack of spiritual discernment: "Do not consider his appearance or his height, for I have rejected him. The Lord does not look at the things man looks at. Man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart" (1 Sam. 16:7). Who could have guessed a red-haired shepherd boy would become the most famous king in the history of Israel?

Paul, in his first letter to the Corinthian church, responds to their preoccupation with the more external qualities for leadership (1 Cor. 1:26–29). God is not confined only to the brightest and the best. Rather, He chooses people who have a heart to follow Him, regardless of their natural abilities or talents.

There is a dangerous practice in contemporary ministries to focus discipleship efforts only on those who have the highest potential. While the intent may be to not waste time on followers *we* perceive to be insincere, there is a danger of discouraging someone God could powerfully use. In His parable of the weeds, Jesus tells the story of a man who sowed good seed in a field. While he was sleeping, an enemy planted bad seed in with the good seed. When the different seeds began to mature, both good and bad plants were apparent. His servants asked him if they should get rid of the bad plants, and the farmer responded: "No, because while you are pulling the weeds, you may root up the wheat with them. Let both grow together until the harvest. At that time I will tell the harvesters: First collect the weeds and tie them into bundles to be burned, then gather the wheat and bring it into my barn" (Matt. 13:29–30). In the early stage of a believer's growth it may be difficult to see evidence of the Holy Spirit at work. In fact, it may be difficult to see a lot of difference between a new Christian and someone living for the world. Time will bring out the true quality of the heart.

Jesus emphasizes this principle again in His next parable about the mustard seed (Matt. 13:31–32). God enjoys making something great out of something small. Who would ever imagine that a tiny mustard seed would produce a gigantic tree? From a human perspective, the small things in this world are rarely important. In God's eyes, however, they can develop into great harvests. We must never underestimate what God can do in our lives or in the lives of others, because He sees tremendous growth potential in every believer who has a heart for Him.

#### **4. Spiritual growth depends on an intimate relationship with Jesus Christ**

Evangelical Christianity has always taught that a relationship with Christ is absolutely necessary for salvation. The relationship must continue beyond this initial introduction. Salvation is only the first step in a long journey of intimacy with our Lord. As important as a marriage ceremony is to the marriage relationship, intimacy in marriage goes much

deeper than either the vows or the honeymoon. Growth in the Christian life requires an ongoing intimacy in one's relationship with Christ.

Jesus gives us a clear illustration of the link between growth and a close relationship with Him in John 15:1–17. Here Jesus describes Himself as the vine and Christians as the branches. The principle repeated over and over again in this passage is that the only way to grow and bear fruit in our lives is to stay closely attached to the vine. The term for staying closely attached is translated among versions as *remain*, *abide*, *continue*, or *dwell*. These words clearly describe the responsibility of the Christian to stay closely connected to Jesus throughout life, as an ongoing relationship of intimate communion and fellowship.

In this passage Jesus describes at least five benefits of staying closely connected. The first benefit is fruitfulness in our lives (John 15:2–5, 8, 16). From Galatians 5:22–23, we discover fruitfulness is at least in part associated with the fruits of the Spirit. These are exhibited primarily through our character and its outflow into the lives of others. Evidence of this fruit is directly related to our goal of maturity in Christ. As a Christian matures, increasingly more fruit should be exhibited.

The second benefit is found in John 15:4: “Remain in me, and I will remain in you.” As we stay close to the Lord, He promises to stay close to us. What a promise! In a day when relationships are becoming less and less secure, Christ gives us a way to enjoy absolute security.

The third benefit of maintaining an intimate relationship with Jesus is answered prayer. “If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you” (John 15:7). The best way to explain this benefit is to recall your relationship with a close friend. The closer two people are to each other, the more sensitive they tend to be to each other's needs. As we get closer to the Lord, the more our thoughts and desires become His, and the more His will is accomplished through us and our prayers.

The fourth benefit of walking in a close and intimate relationship is what Jesus terms *joy* (John 15:11). More than simple happiness, based on circumstances, the joy that Jesus describes relates to a supernatural inner peace that brings emotional satisfaction even in the midst of the most distressing circumstances. It reflects a deep satisfaction based on a person's assurance of the presence of God in one's life.

The fifth benefit of staying close to Jesus and obeying His Word is friendship with Jesus. As He says: “You are my friends if you do what I command. I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you” (John 15:14–15). With this level of friendship with Jesus, He enables His disciples to discern God's Word with more clarity and insight. The former sting of legalism and false guilt is replaced with a sense of freedom and partnership. Friends of Jesus enjoy all the rich blessings of intimacy with the King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

## **5. Growth is primarily an inside-out process**

Growth relates more to the condition of a person's heart on the inside than to what a person encounters from the outside. Biblical content, experience, and relationships help us grow only as we interact and respond from the heart under the illumination of the Holy Spirit. Principles of growth are learned only as we wrestle to integrate them into the core of our being. Since the beginning of recorded biblical history, God has challenged humankind to wholehearted worship and service (Deut. 6:4–6). Loving, serving, and worshiping God are actions that arise from a heart of passion. Our challenge is to kindle the spiritual fire within our hearts.

Once again, we turn to Jesus' parables for insight. In His story of the sower (or, more appropriately, the Parable of the Soils), Jesus explains the dynamics of spiritual growth using the familiar garden analogy (Mark 4:1–20). Although common interpretation of this text focuses on the role of the sower, Jesus identifies the soil as the most significant factor in spiritual formation. Four different types of soil are represented in the text: (1) hard soil on the path, (2) rocky, shallow soil, (3) weedy soil, (4) good soil. The different soils represent the different conditions of human hearts related to their receptivity to the gospel message (or the "seed"). Jesus' main purpose in telling this parable to the disciples is to explain the dynamics of how and why spiritual growth occurs differently among people. How growth occurs, or whether or not it occurs at all, depends to a great degree on the condition of the heart. When one's heart is soft and receptive to spiritual things, the ability to understand and assimilate the Word is heightened. Spiritual growth begins in the heart and moves to outward expressions of growth.

## **6. Spiritual growth relates to every aspect of our lives**

What begins inside the person eventually affects every aspect of life: family, friendships, leisure, business, etc. God's desire is that every person loves Him with their whole being: body, mind, and spirit (Deut. 6:5). Spiritual growth, seen in this light, is a process in which a person willingly allows the Holy Spirit to control increasingly more of his or her life.

Spiritual growth also relates to all aspects of personal development. Once again, Jesus provides us with a perfect example of this process as recorded in Luke 2:52: "And Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men." Although this simple description of Jesus' growth process is not meant to include every category of human development, it does suggest that growth is multidimensional. We can conclude it involves the intellectual, physical, spiritual, and relational categories as named by today's social scientists. This principle of multidimensional growth is clearly seen throughout the Old and New Testaments. The continual cry of the prophets of the Old Testament is not only to return to God but also to show evidence of godliness in practical action (Zech. 7:9–10). Spiritual growth and maturity express themselves in both belief and action.

Throughout the New Testament we find this principle repeated in various contexts. John the Baptist challenges people not only to "repent" (Matt. 3:2), but also to "produce fruit in keeping with repentance" (Matt. 3:8). The challenge here is to change one's heart

and belief system as well as one's behavior. Coming to God and growing in godliness demand our whole being. Jesus reiterates the multidimensional nature of commitment to God when addressing a Jewish lawyer in Matthew 22:34–40. Samuel Shoemaker states that “we begin the actual Christian experience when we surrender as much of ourselves as we can to as much of Christ as we understand.”<sup>1</sup> A simple commitment grows into an ever-broadening stream of fullness of the Holy Spirit that transforms us, by God's grace, into greater conformity to Christ's likeness.

Paul calls this transformation process the “renewing of your mind” (Rom. 12:1–2). He states that it begins with offering our bodies to Christ as “living sacrifices,” refusing to follow the pagan lifestyle of the world. Regardless of how philosophers and theologians subdivide the nature of persons (body, mind, and/or soul), Scripture clearly teaches that growing in Christ involves every aspect of our personhood and life.

## **7. Growth happens most naturally within a close social context**

It is no surprise that close-knit families and churches are nurturing nests for strong, growing Christians. Characterized by love, Christianity is learned primarily within the laboratory of human relationships. A family provides the most natural environment for children to learn to love and honor God. God's plan has always been for parents to model, teach, and train their children within the intimacy of the home relationship. In Deuteronomy 6:6–9, Moses instructs the leaders of each family unit in ancient Israel to first model their faith in front of their children, then to teach or impress God's commandments on them, talking about them informally throughout daily activities, and finally, to post reminders throughout the house of God's laws. The home combined both formal and informal teaching and was designed to be the richest educational environment for members to naturally learn to worship, love, and obey God.

An examination of both history and contemporary experience reveals even Christian parents fail to live up to their biblical responsibilities. When children grow up in an atmosphere of emotional warmth and encouragement, they are more apt to respond to the teachings of Christ as they are modeled by their parents. When children do not have the privilege of growing up in such a home, a compelling need to find this warmth and love in other places will develop. Such needs often lead to unwholesome fulfillments.

God provides the context of the multigenerational family of God as our opportunity to learn, grow, and develop into Christ-likeness. Healthy local churches provide a community where people of all ages, walks of life, ethnicities, and vocations learn together to love God and other persons. This principle of diversity is clearly demonstrated by the dynamics of the first church in Jerusalem. As you read Acts 2:42–47, observe the evidences of the quality of their community and its influence on the people in the surrounding areas.

One of the primary reasons for the growth of the early church was the sense of community its members enjoyed. People develop best when they feel a part of a close, caring, and committed group. People also learn best when they wrestle together with issues that are of immediate concern. The early church realized the only way they could fulfill the Great Commission and infiltrate a pagan world was by being unified as the family of God. Fellowship and community were strategic factors in the growth of the early church. The term *fellowship*, from the Greek word *koinonia*, was used to express the common partnership between fellow believers because of their close relationship with Jesus Christ.

Paul explains the dynamics of the body of Christ in helping people to grow in Ephesians 4:11–16. As leaders in the church train people to serve and minister to one another, individuals in the fellowship are built up in unity and knowledge of Christ. When members of the body of Christ lovingly interact with one another, people become more Christ-like. Each person's common relationship with Jesus Christ and the use of gifts and abilities in a significant way is what holds the body of Christ together. Analyzing this passage from an educator's perspective helps us realize people learn and grow when: they are trained by experienced, older mentors; they are involved in a close, caring group; they are encouraged by their peers; they interact with significant other people; they use what they are learning on a daily basis; and when they see significance in what they are learning and doing in the lives of others.

## **8. Significant growth occurs within the context of frustration, suffering, or challenge**

One major contribution educational psychology has made to the field of Christian education is we now understand more objectively what we have observed about how people learn. Simple reflection on the history of Christianity shows that persecution has made the church stronger. Some social science research has attempted to explain why this is so. Learning theorists point us to the only way some living organisms actually grow (or change) is by encountering an obstacle big enough to make them rethink the way they previously dealt with things. When faced with such challenges, the organism experiences initial frustration and discouragement. Yet, through a process of trial and error and evaluating options, the organism will eventually either overcome the obstacle or be controlled by the obstacle. Based on the assumption that all living organisms learn in similar ways, it is easy to apply this principle to people.

There is ample evidence in Scripture, also, to point to the principle that we often grow most through difficult times. In 2 Thessalonians 1:3, Paul commends the faith of those in the church. In the next verse Paul tells us what was taking place in their community that precipitated their growth: "Therefore, among God's churches we boast about your perseverance and faith in all the persecutions and trials that you are enduring." Throughout church history, persecution and suffering have only served to make the church stronger and more resilient.

Suffering is presented as a necessary, and even normal, part of the Christian's life. Romans 8:18–27 gives a clear theological rationale for the reality of suffering. Paul continues developing our understanding in Philippians 1:29 by stating "it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for him." While it is definitely true that suffering may be a part of the *cost* of following Jesus, it may be helpful if we were to discover some positive *reasons* for suffering. A significant clue comes from Hebrews 5:8–9. Here the author explains one of the purposes of suffering in Jesus' life. Christ, as both fully God and fully man, learned in the same way that we learn. He learned to obey His Father, the text says, through His suffering. After a life of perfect obedience, in the midst of severe suffering, He became the source of salvation for those who would follow in His footsteps. We cannot expect to learn any easier than did our Master. Suffering, then, is to be seen as an opportunity to learn obedience. The tests of suffering give us the chance to strengthen our faith in the Word of God rather than trust our feelings. Suffering becomes an instrument of pruning in our

growth process to help us grow more directly toward the likeness of Christ. If our goal is to become more Christ-like and to know God more intimately, suffering is inevitable. Paul makes this connection clear in Philippians 3:10–11: “I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead.” Intimacy with Christ is closely connected with both the experience of the power of the Holy Spirit and the experience of suffering.

Suffering can be appreciated as a valuable part of the gift of salvation only if we understand how it helps us learn, grow, and develop more into Christ-likeness. God uses suffering and persecution in our lives to challenge us to higher levels of spiritual thinking and living. When seen in this light, suffering moves us closer to our goal of Christ-likeness. Suffering and persecution challenge the reasons why we follow the Lord. It might be relatively easy to obey God’s Word when it is profitable, it makes us feel good, or it brings us popularity, but the experience of suffering usually challenges these carnal motivations. By staying obedient to the Lord in the midst of suffering or temptation, Christians can strengthen their faith. “Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial, because when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him” (James 1:12).

### **Summary**

In this chapter we have examined eight ways people grow and develop into maturity in Christ. These principles can be used to help us understand how God is working in our lives personally and enable us to design more intentional learning strategies.

### **For Further Discussion**

1. Which of the eight ways that people grow and develop is the most significant for you personally?
2. Identify a time in your life when you grew the most and why.