“GROWING IN GRACE & FAITH”
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The lesson we learn from every life form is that “all things grow” [or they die] and that growth is highly dependent upon specific environmental factors — warmth, nutrients, moisture, sunlight, and some kind of internal guidance system. By properly assimilating the various elements, everything gradually grows from a state of immaturity to a state of maturity. It should be noted, what is true of the physical realm is also true of the spiritual realm. The apostle Paul charges us to “grow up in all aspects of Christ” (Eph 4:15); likewise, Peter urges us to “grow in the grace and knowledge of Christ” (2 Pet 3:18), and “grow with respect to your salvation” (1 Pet 2:2). The Christian life begins with “birth,” and after birth comes “growth” — if there is no growth after being born, then there is no life (Jam 2:14-20; 1 Jn 3:17; 4:8, 20; 5:1, 3). To be “in Christ” means to be saved, regenerated, and growing in sanctification (holiness). Jerry Bridges reminds us in his book, “Growing Your Faith,” that there is no such thing as an “adult Christian” who no longer needs to grow… that spiritual growth doesn’t just happen, but requires a diligent, intentional application of the “spiritual disciplines of grace” that God has provided for us. We’ll expand more on these disciplines later.

It should be noted, growing in the grace and knowledge of Christ means that you come to a fuller understanding (through His Word) of what God did for you on the cross, and continues to do in your life by His Spirit, and that you walk in obedience to His will in this world — those are tall orders that require a lifetime of growing, learning and serving.

Because “grace” is foundational to our Christian growth, it is important that we launch this study with a correct understanding of grace. A general definition of grace is this — Grace is undeserved blessing freely bestowed by God, without regard for any human merit. Here are a few ways various theologians have described it: A. W. Tozer says, “Grace is the good pleasure of God that inclines Him to bestow benefits upon the undeserving.” Henry Ironside describes it thus: “Grace is not only undeserved favor, but it is favor shown to the one who has deserved the very opposite.” Jerry Bridges writes, “Grace is God reaching downward to people who are in rebellion against Him.” One unknown author explained it like this: “Anything this side of hell is pure grace.” Grace has been contrasted with justice and mercy as follows —

Justice is getting what you deserve.
Mercy is not getting what you deserve.
Grace is getting what you do not deserve.

With the foregoing definitions in mind, it is also important to remember that there are two kinds of grace: Common grace & Saving grace. Common grace is extended to all human beings without discrimination — God’s sustaining care is given to all humanity, irrespective of merit, be it through His provision for their physical needs, or the restraint of evil in the world (cf. Matt 5:45; Rom 13:1-7; Col 1:17; Heb 1:3). Therefore the essence of the biblical doctrine of grace is this: “God is for us even though we are against Him” (cf. Jn 3:19; Eph 2:1-3; Col 1:21). In comparison to common grace, Saving grace is that grace whereby God redeems, transforms (sanctifies), and ultimately glorifies people. Unlike common grace, which is universally given, saving grace is only bestowed upon those who place their trust in Christ for salvation (cf. Rom 5:8, 10; 8:29-30; 11:6; 1 Cor 15:10; 2 Cor 5:18; Eph 2:8; Phil 1:6; 2:13; 1 Jn 4:10, 19). So God is not merely for those who have been saved in a general way, but has effectively acted toward them in a saving way; thus grace is summed up in Scripture in the
name “Jesus Christ” (Jn 1:17; Rom 8:31). So God’s saving grace not only overcomes sin and enmity through the cross, but establishes covenant fellowship with Him. Why is God gracious to us, you ask? because He is gracious in Himself — just as He loves us because He is love; not because we are deserving or lovely (which none of us are). The truth of the matter is, if grace were an obligation on God’s part, it would no longer be grace. All of us are sinners through and through (Rom 7:18), though some actually think they’re better than others. In truth, God should be “against us” — not “for us.” So grace is God’s favor through Christ to people who deserve His disfavor… yet, wonder of wonders! God in His love came to this world in the person of Jesus Christ to redeem us with His own blood (Jn 3:16; Eph 2:1, 4-9; 1:7,14) — “God made Him (Christ) who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Cor 5:21). That, my friend, is grace. It is also important to remember that the operation of God’s grace is a deep mystery that far exceeds the capacity of the human mind to understand (Is 55:8-9; Rom 11:33, 36).

Before proceeding to the “next section,” let me stress the importance of reading the various biblical references that have been provided throughout this study, because they are critical for gaining greater insight and a fuller understanding of the ideas and concepts presented. To “fully quote” each biblical reference would make this a far longer and more cumbersome read. So rather than just casually reading through this material, make it a “devotional study,” even if it takes you a week or two to complete. You will discover that your faith will be greatly enriched in doing so, just as mine was in writing it. I would also suggest that you make a “hard copy” of this study, and with a marker and pen in hand “highlight and make notes” regarding those ideas and statements that are the most poignant and meaningful to your own spiritual walk. Let me remind you, grasping the issues of grace and faith are essential for experiencing a fruitful and joyful life — they are the two main elements of spiritual growth!

The Need to Live by Grace

The grace of God “teaches us to say ‘no’ to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives” (Titus 2:12). Though God loves and accepts us “just as we are,” He does not leave us that way — by the same grace through which He saves us, He sets about to change us. It is by grace that God provides a way to be saved… it is by grace we are enabled to believe… it is by grace that our hearts are instructed in the ways of godliness… and it is by grace that we are enabled to walk in newness of life — in short, salvation beginning to end is all a work of grace (God’s unmerited favor). If you think God “owes” it to you, then you have completely misunderstood your spiritual condition — the truth is, you and I are diabolical enemies of God who deserve death. It is our diabolical, unrighteous, self-centered “flesh” that distorts this reality. Not having a “righteousness of our own,” every believer inherits the “righteousness of Christ” (Phil 3:8-9); none of us did a thing to deserve it. This is called the doctrine of justification; the word “justify” means to “declare righteous” (Rom 3:28; 4:3-5; 5:1) — it was only by grace that we were given the righteousness of Christ. Though all of us as believers now have the “righteousness of Christ” (because of the gracious work of Christ on the cross), we are now to “walk in that righteousness” as His children — and this is done by depending upon the gracious indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit (Ezek 36:26-27; Gal 5:16). Remember, Scripture tells us that “apart from Christ we can do nothing” (Jn 15:5), but “through Christ we can do everything” (Phil 4:13). So we are not only dependent upon the righteousness of Christ for our acceptance with God, we are dependent upon the power of Christ for the ability to pursue spiritual growth. Therefore we must learn to depend on both the
righteousness of Christ and the power of Christ — this is what it means to live by grace, and this is why “grace” is foundational to spiritual growth.

It should be noted, we are not saved by grace and blessed by works — we are not only justified by grace through faith (Eph 2:8), we stand and live every day in this same grace… we do not add “works” to grace; rather, we are so gripped by the magnificence and boundless generosity of God’s grace that we respond out of “gratitude” rather than out of a sense of “duty.” This only occurs in those believers who truly acknowledge “their bankruptcy” with regard to righteousness; they are only too mindful of their own corruption — this is the “humility” necessary to experiencing more of God’s grace (Mt 23:12; Jam 4:6). Obviously, if God’s [gracious] work on the cross and in your soul isn’t that “big of a deal in your mind,” then there will be very little gratitude in your heart for all He has done for you. Remember, God bought you off the auction block of sin (you were a “child of Satan”), and redeemed you with His own blood (Rom 5:9; Eph 1:7; 1 Pet 1:18-19). If that sobering thought doesn’t produce “gratefulness” in your heart, then the truth is you may not be saved at all (2 Cor 13:5), or you have wandered away from the cross. **Steve Brown (one of my favorite authors),** in a sermon he preached on “The Song of Grace,” put it like this: “The problem isn’t that we have made the gospel too good; the problem is that we have haven’t made it good enough.” Though we should seek to practice spiritual discipline and obedience, we must be careful to do so out of a “grateful response to God’s grace,” rather than trying to earn God’s blessings. The truth is, our **motivation** is more important to God than our **performance** — the problem many believers have is that they are more concerned about their performance than their motivation. Scripture tells us that the Lord “searches men’s hearts” (1 Chr 28:9), and “exposes the motives of their hearts” (1 Cor 4:5). The long and short of it is this — our **motives must spring from a love for Christ and a desire to glorify Him.** **Jerry Bridges** says, “We cannot have such a Godward motivation if we think that God owes something to us… or that we must earn God’s favor by our disciplines… or fear that we may forfeit God’s favor by our lack of them. **Living under the grace of God frees us to obey God and serve Him as a loving and thankful response to Him for our salvation, and for blessings already guaranteed us by His grace.** Only when we are thoroughly convinced that the Christian life is entirely of grace will we be able to joyfully practice the disciplines that help us grow” (Bridges, pp.27-28).

**The Need to be Motivated by Love**

Paul writes to the church at Corinth that it is “Christ’s love for us that compels us” (2 Cor 5:14). Christ’s love compels us to live no longer for ourselves but for Him who died for us — the idea here is a commitment to the lordship of Christ in every area of our lives. We are no longer to live for ourselves but for Him — this is what spiritual growth is all about. Only a deep realization of the “love of Christ for us” can compel us to make this kind of commitment. Christ’s love for us must be the governing influence that controls our lives, not a fear of consequences or an expectation of some reward. The “present tense” of the Greek verb that Paul used in his statement to the Corinthians is particularly helpful here — thus his words can more accurately be translated, “the love of Christ continually constrains us.” In other words, Christ’s love was the constant wellspring of Paul’s motivation every day… he never took for granted the death of Christ for him… as such, he was compelled and impelled to live for the One who died for him. Writes Paul: “**Blessed** are those whose transgressions are forgiven… whose sin the Lord will never count against him” (Rom 4:7-8). What an incredible encouragement to know that God will **never** judge us for any of our sins — my sinful nature is as wicked as the next person’s, so I know
the import of that statement — therefore we are to ask God to purge those sinful traits from our character, that we can (by His Spirit) put them to death as Paul instructs us in Romans 8:13. It is only when we are “compelled by His love for us” that we will seek to put away those sins.

No one who studies the life of the apostle Paul can help but wonder what made him serve so tirelessly and unselfishly — it was because of Christ’s love for him. The apostle John tells us the only reason we love God is “because He first loved us” (1 Jn 4:10, 19). Therefore it must be “God’s love for us” that compels us and moves us along in the Christian life. As Paul contemplated the incredible love Christ had shown to him, he could not help but be moved along in service to the Lord. John MacArthur writes in his commentary on 2 Corinthians: “It was that magnanimous, free, unmerited love of Christ that controlled, drove, and motivated Paul [to live for Christ].” Paul never lost his sense of wonder at Christ’s love, as he expressed so profoundly in his letter to the Romans (8:35-39). Furthermore, that’s why Paul could say, “I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me” (Gal 2:20). To the Ephesians he wrote that “the love of Christ surpasses knowledge” (Eph 3:19). In short, it was the incomprehensible, unbreakable, unconditional love of Christ for him that overwhelmed Paul. The hymn writer Charles Wesley expressed it this way — “Amazing love! How can it be that Thou, my God, shouldst die for me!” The apostle Paul’s argument is irresistible — Christ died for us that we should no longer live for ourselves, but for Him (2 Cor 2:15). Jesus did not die for us so that we might go on living selfishly for ourselves and do what we please (Gal 5:17; Rom 8:5)… as we are all tempted to do. No! Christ died for us that we might henceforth turn our lives over to Him in willing, whole-hearted, glad devotion. The truth of the matter is, when the reality of this truth is shallow in our thinking, we will continue to live for ourselves.

The “root” of every spiritual problem we have is “a questioning or doubting of God’s love for us in some way” — and the enemy of our soul wants to keep it that way. The issue is very clear: either we believe that God really loves us, or we question it to some degree, and in so doing make the Christian life a more frustrating and joyless journey. If you really want to become all God wants you to be, and experience all He wants you to experience, you must believe in the unconditional love of God — if you put this issue on the back burner, thinking “something else” must be the problem, you will NEVER become a fruitful, joy-filled Christian. Only the realization that “God really loves you” will deliver you from the bondage you are experiencing and transform your life. There is no greater truth for the believer to affirm. End of argument. Our problem as human beings is that “our feelings” often dominate and control our thinking — remember, our thought-life is the true measure of who we are (Prv 23:7); so our thought-life must be controlled. It should be noted, “thinking” is our most constant activity; our thoughts are our constant occupation — we are never without them, but we can choose the direction and content of those thoughts. When we continue to entertain sinful thoughts once they have been identified as such… sin will immediately conceive, and with it, its painful results (Jam 1:14-15). So when we “feel” that God really doesn’t love us, that He is actually frustrated and disappointed with us and rejects us, the sin of not believing that He really loves us and that He is really for us (it is sin to not believe Him) overwhelms our spirit, and our own self-induced painful estrangement results — and again, Satan is thrilled.

It is important for us to remember that the dynamic of the flesh is “feeling,” and the dynamic of the Spirit is “faith” — note the contrast, feelings vs. faith. Though all of our feelings (desires) are not necessarily sinful, many of them are, and therein lies the problem — so we must learn
to immediately say “no” to the sinful ones — this means “to stop reflecting on fleshly desires (feelings)” and “intentionally start focusing on godly thoughts” (Phil 4:8-9). We do so, understanding that this decision (battle) is often a difficult one (Gal 5:17). It should be noted, victory often comes only through prayer, affirming what is really true (that is the essence of faith), and depending on the Holy Spirit (knowing that our own willpower is simply not sufficient). That is what it means to be engaged in spiritual warfare — by the way (it goes without saying), none of us “feel” like fighting this battle. Furthermore, many Christians become disillusioned after years of “fighting the flesh,” because it does not die or calm down — thus they think their efforts as a believer have been nothing but a “failure,” because their flesh seems to keep winning battles. As a result they simply give up fighting. In the next section of this study, we will see that “the flesh never dies in any of us” in this life… but before proceeding to that section, let me first expand upon this “feeling” issue a little more, and the need to be “motivated by love.”

**Feelings** are incredibly important to everyone — we all want to “feel good.” Nobody likes feeling bad, and “feeling good” is just about as important to believers as it is to unbelievers — the difference is, when we “don’t feel good,” we immediately go to God and ask Him to deliver us from our “negative feelings”… and why not? He’s God! And He can “change our feelings” instantly if He so wanted. Therein is the “rub” for most believers: why doesn’t God make me “feel good” when I ask Him to do so? What possible “joy” could He get out of my “feeling bad”? If I’m His child, and He really loves me, why would He want me to feel bad? Sounds logical… but it doesn’t jive with reality. Such logic questions there being a “divine purpose” in all negative experiences. It is only through trials and bewildering difficulties that God is able to “transform us” into the image of His Son (cf. Rom 5:3-5; 8:23-25; Heb 12:1-11; Jam 1:2-4; 1 Pet 2:21; 4:1-2, 12, 18; 5:7-10), and get us to go to Him and enter into “His plan” for our lives — which is dying to self, the world, the flesh, and sin (Mt 16:24-25; Rom 8:36; 1 Cor 1:5-10; 2 Cor 4:10-11). The truth the matter is, if we “felt good” all the time, there would be little reason for us to go to God and enter into “His transforming plan” for our lives. Years ago I came up with a pithy little saying that pretty much describes the human psyche — “Nothing feels better than feeling good.” Because I enjoyed “feeling good” so much, and didn’t like “feeling bad,” that little saying became a favorite of mine — I noticed how “good” it felt not to be in a state of pain after recovering from some sickness, and how “good” it felt to get out from under some painful experience that I was going through. At that point, I would then turn to God and tell Him, “God, it sure feels good to feel good; thank you for delivering me out of this mess!” I was well aware of the fact that God had a hand in it in some way. However, shortly after the “high” (the “good feelings”) I was experiencing, I noticed how quickly it disappeared. It was the Lord simply teaching me that there is a lot more to life than feeling good, and as long as I made that the top priority in life it was really going to affect my life spiritually.

An additional thought on being “motivated by love” — Paul writes, “In view of God’s mercy, offer your bodies as living sacrifices to Him” (12:1). Our motivation to obey and serve God cannot rise to such heights until we learn to live daily by grace, and experience freedom each day from the bondage of the performance treadmill. Writes Bridges, “A genuine heart response to the worthiness of God is the highest possible motivation for pursuing the disciplines of spiritual growth and for obedience and service to God. But we cannot ‘break through’ to that level of motivation until we are first motivated by His grace, mercy, and love. As long as we struggle with ‘earning our own acceptance with God,’ we will not be motivated by His grace, mercy, and love.” We will only “grow in grace” when we become progressively more aware of our own continued spiritual bankruptcy, and the unmerited, undeserved favor of God — as we
grow in grace, we will discover that His love will compel us to live, not for ourselves, but for Him who died for us. It should be noted, making God’s grace, mercy and love our primary motivation in life doesn’t happen instantaneously — because of the presence of indwelling sin (the flesh), it happens in small incremental steps that occur in our daily walk, moment by moment, as we strive to “walk in the Spirit.” Remember, this is the life God has called us to while we sojourn here on earth, and He is well aware of the fact that it is not an easy one, and that it involves many ups and downs (Jn 16:33; 2 Cor 4:8-11; 1 Pet 4:1, 12; 13; 18; 5:7-10). All of us as believers are “spiritually challenged” every day, so keep your helmet on and stay in the game! (Eph 6:17).

### The “Means” of Spiritual Growth

Paul tells us in his letter to Titus that “the grace of God teaches us to say ‘no’ to ungodly living” (Titus 2:11-12). Paul used this same word when he charged fathers to bring up their children in the training (discipline) and instruction of the Lord (Eph 6:4). So this teaching (or discipline) is not simply the impartation of knowledge, as important as that may be, but the work of God in our souls to conform us to the image of His Son. Though in the physical realm children eventually reach adulthood and are no longer under the discipline of their parents, in the spiritual realm we remain under God’s parental discipline as long as we live. As Jerry Bridges puts it, “The very same grace that brings salvation also trains us to live lives that are pleasing to God — all of God’s disciplinary processes are grounded in His unmerited and unconditional favor (grace) toward us” (Bridges, p.38). So it is God Himself who initiates and superintends our spiritual growth; this is not to say that we have no responsibility to respond to God’s spiritual child-training, but it is to say that He is the one in charge of our training.

Again, grace teaches us to say ‘no’ to ungodliness and worldly passions. Ungodliness in its broadest form basically means to disregard God, to ignore Him, or to not take Him into account in our life; ungodly people have no regard for God. As believers we are to “have regard for God” in everything we do. When we trust in Christ as our Savior, we bring a “habit of ungodliness” into our new life in Christ… but now that we are under the reign of grace, grace teaches us to “renounce this attitude of ungodliness.” Obviously this training does not occur all at once in our lives — when we come to Christ, God begins a process of rooting out ungodliness from our lives that continues throughout our earthly journey. God has called us to a “holy life” (1 Pet 1:15-16); that is, a life of “moral purity,” because God will not have anything to do with sin — He is holy and He hates sin (1 Pet 1:15-16; Rev 15:4; Zech 8:17; Heb 1:9; 1 Jn 1:5). Remember, God’s Spirit is the Holy Spirit. Since the word “holy” means to “separate,” God calls us to separate ourselves from sin… to purify ourselves from everything that contaminates the body and the spirit… to throw off everything that hinders this effort… and to abstain from those sinful desires which wage war against our souls (2 Cor 7:1; Heb 12:2; 1 Pet 2:11). So to pursue holiness is to take aggressive action to separate ourselves from the sinful expressions of the flesh, and the ever-encroaching temptations of the world around us.

Since life is a constant series of “choices,” it is through these choices that we develop Christlike habits of living. “Sinful choices” tend to cloud our reason, dull our consciences, stimulate our sinful desires, and weaken our wills; therefore each sin we commit reinforces the habit of sinning and makes it easier to give in to that temptation the next time we encounter it. On the other hand,
making “right choices” tends to strengthen our resolve against sin. So it is possible for us as believers to “train ourselves” in either a right or wrong direction — and that’s the sober reality. Making the right choices to obey God involves the discipline of “mortification.” To mortify means to “deny” our sinful desires… to “subdue” them… to “deprive” them of their power… to “put them to death,” be they thoughts, words or deeds. Paul was explicit about these misdeeds in his letter to the Colossians — “Put to death whatever belongs to your fleshly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry” (Col 3:5). It is important to note that we are to mortify our sins — not our sin nature — we cannot eliminate the principle of sin (or indwelling sin) in this life; rather we are to mortify “the specific sins,” which are an expression of indwelling sin. The goal of mortification is to break sinful habit patterns, and weaken the habits of sin so that we make the right choices. Furthermore, it is important for us to “constantly” fight against them — we are to “continually,” every day (as the flesh seeks to assert itself) fight against them. No believer, regardless of his spiritual maturity, ever gets beyond the need to mortify the sinful deeds of his flesh; therefore, we must make it our business, as long as we live, to mortify the sins that so easily entangle us (Heb 12:1).

We must also realize that in putting habits of sin to death we are saying “no” to our own internal natural desires — all sin is desired, thus mortification involves an internal war against our sin disposition (Gal 5:17). So mortification involves a struggle between what we know to be right (according to our biblical, Holy Spirit induced convictions) and what we desire to do (according to the flesh). Whatever our particular areas of vulnerability to sin are, mortification is going to involve a struggle — and often it will be an intense struggle. Because our fleshly sinful desires are strong and run deep, they cry out for fulfillment — that’s why Paul used such language as “put to death.” As you pursue holiness, you must realize that you cannot do this in the strength of your own willpower, or think that mortifying sin somehow makes you more acceptable to God — the Christian life is always about the “righteousness of Christ” and the “power of Christ.” Knowing this you will then be motivated by gratitude and strengthened by the Holy Spirit as you seek to be holy because God is holy. Reflect upon the words of Paul to his friend in ministry, Timothy: “Godliness is a means of great gain when accompanied by contentment” (1 Tim 6:6); it is when our lives are being governed by the flesh that we lack contentment.

The apostle Paul in his letter to the Ephesians tells us to “put off the old self” and “put on the new self” (Eph 4:22-24; also Col 3:9-10)… so we must work simultaneously at putting off the characteristics of our old selves, and putting on the characteristics of our new selves… spiritual growth involves this two-fold change in our character. Paul goes on to tell us that the “old self” is in a constant state of becoming more and more corrupt through the lusts of deceit — thus, it is very clear that our “flesh” (the “old self”) is not capable of undergoing some improvements; it is rotten to the core, and is increasingly becoming more rotten every day (Eph 4:22). Who among us cannot attest to this? As young children we were far less corrupt than we are today — why? because the operation of lustful deceits in our souls have made our flesh significantly more corrupt. That is simply the reality of our condition. Conversely, the “new self” is in a state of being renewed and growing in its likeness of God through the Holy Spirit’s work in our minds by the Word (Jn 14:16-17; 16:13; 17:17; Eph 4:23; Rom 12:2; 2 Cor 3:18; Eph 6:17; Phil 2:13; Heb 4:12). So the “old self” is in a steady state of decline (worsening), and the “new self” is in a constant state of advance (improving). With all of this emphasis on practical Christian living, it is critical that the believer not lose sight of the fact that it is “grace” that teaches us (Titus 2:12-13)… that it is “grace” whereby we are undergoing God’s parental training… that it is by “His grace” that God disciplines and forgives us… and that
it is “God’s grace” that enables us to live the Christian life. As the apostle Paul said, “I planted, Apollos watered, but God was causing the growth” (1 Cor 3:6). In the same way, there may be “actions that we take by faith,” but God is the source and ultimate cause of any fruit or growth that takes place in or through us — we can no more cause fruitfulness or spiritual growth than we can cause our salvation; all we can do is simply follow the Lord’s instructions.

The Holy Spirit works in a twofold manner in our lives: when He works in a monergistic (that’s the term used by theologians) manner in us, He works alone apart from any conscious effort on our part… when He works in a synergistic manner in us, the work He does is one in which we participate, because He enables us to work. So whether it is the Holy Spirit working alone, or His enabling us to work, ultimately all spiritual growth is the result of His work — we cannot make one inch of progress apart from Him (Jn 15:5). Paul tells us that as believers we are in the process of being transformed into the image of Christ by the Spirit (2 Cor 3:18) — this progressive work of changing us into the image of Christ is known as the “doctrine of sanctification.” Though sanctification is the work of the Holy Spirit, it does involve our wholehearted response in obedience to His directives and the regular use of the spiritual disciplines. Though all believers are growing in their likeness to Christ, some make more progress than others because of their commitment and participation in the process.

Scripture tells us that sanctification actually begins at conversion — God prophesied of this through His prophets Jeremiah and Ezekiel: “I will put My law in their minds and write it on their hearts… I will give them a new heart and put My Spirit in them and cause them to follow my decrees” (Jer 31:33; Ezek 36:26-27). So God has made us a “new creation” (2 Cor 5:17), has given us a “new life” (Jn 3:3-8), and this “new disposition” causes us to desire to be conformed to the will of God — however, the residual effects of our “old self” make this a struggle. The Christian life is entirely a work of grace. It is like God walking you to a location somewhere, and telling you to take your shovel and dig a hole five feet deep, and then remove a large container from the hole and open it, and to your surprise you discover it is full of “gold!” Can you then claim that it was a “work” that you did? The truth of the matter is, God could have taken a “blind man” or a “retarded child” to that location and done that work. Somewhere along the line, every believer needs to come to that point in his Christian experience, where he sees God alone as the source of everything that is good in his life. It is only the stubbornness of one’s diabolical flesh that will keep a person from doing so. Need you be reminded that every one of us struggle with this because we all inhabit sinful flesh.

Our part or response to the Spirit’s work is that “we pursue spiritual growth, all the while being consciously dependent upon the enabling power of the Holy Spirit.” Christlikeness is the goal for everyone who trusts in Christ. As Paul said, “I can do all things through Christ who gives me the strength” (Phil 4:13). Conformity to Jesus is a lifelong process that will never be completely attained in this life — that’s why Paul refers to the “continual change” in his letter to the church at Corinth: “With ever-increasing glory, from one degree of glory to another” (2 Cor 3:18). Though sin as a “reigning power” was defeated at the cross, it will seek to harass and sabotage our Christian life as long as we live. One of my professors in seminary, Jerry Bridges, reminds us of the difference between the unbeliever living complacently in sin (he has total disregard for God), and the believer struggling against sin (because of the presence of indwelling sin and the presence of the Holy Spirit in his life) — if we are going to pursue spiritual maturity, he says, we
must accept the fact that there will be “continual tension within us” between our desires and our performance (Bridges, p. 57).

**The Need for God’s Word**

The primary means of growth God has given us is “His Word.” Peter tells us to “long for the pure milk of the Word, that by it you may grow in respect to salvation” (1 Pet 2:2) — we grow spiritually by “renewing our mind” with the Word (Rom 12:2). The Holy Spirit uses the teaching of the Word to continually influence and change our values and convictions, thus producing a change in character. God made us “thinking creatures,” and it is through our “minds” that He communicates His will to us — and it is through the Holy Spirit that God’s Word is made intelligible and understandable. Spiritual truth differs from other kinds of truth in that it requires the Holy Spirit to understand (1 Cor 2:14). Scripture is the very word of God — “All Scripture is God-breathed (inspired by God’s Spirit) and is profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; that the man of God may be adequately equipped for every good work” (2 Tim 3:16-17). The apostle Peter wrote: “Grace and peace be multiplied to you in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord (through the Word); seeing that His divine power (the Holy Spirit — emphatic!) has granted to us everything pertaining to life and godliness, through the true knowledge of Him (via the Word) who called us by His own glory and excellence. And by that same mighty power, He has given us all of His rich and wonderful promises (in His Word), in order that by them you might become partakers of the divine nature” (2 Pet 1:2-4) — notice carefully the emphasis upon God’s Word and the Holy Spirit with regard to the experience of His grace and peace in our lives. Without the Spirit effectuating God’s eternal Word in our hearts, there is neither salvation nor sanctification. Our responsibility as believers is to humbly and prayerfully consider it, and act upon it as the Spirit directs — that is why Peter exhorts us to “grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (2 Pet 3:18). Regarding the process God used to communicate His Word, He used men of faith “to write down His Word under the direction and inspiration of the Holy Spirit” (2 Pet 1:21); so they didn’t just write “their own thoughts,” but the thoughts they had under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Therefore God’s Word is both a reliable and authoritative expression of His will, even though man had a part in its construction.

The author of Hebrews tells us that “faith is confidence in the trustworthiness of God, and the conviction that what God says is true” (Heb 11:1). Since the substance of faith is intelligible, it must come to us through some sort of revelation, and that revelation is God’s inspired Word. The apostle Paul confirms this truth when he tells us that “we acquire faith when the truths of God’s Word are carefully considered” (Rom 10:17), be it through the spoken or written word.

You’ll notice that faith comes to us through God’s Word, not through the wisdom, philosophy or psychology of men. It is when God’s Word is carefully and humbly considered that the Holy Spirit convinces us of its truthfulness, and plants it in our hearts, thus producing conviction (Jn 14:16-17, 26; 16:7-14; Jam 1:21-25). According to Scripture, we are to read and study His Word daily… meditate on it day and night… carefully examine what others say it teaches… memorize it… and obey it (Deut 17:18-19; 2 Chron 7:14; Ps 1:2; 25:5; 119:11, 105, 165; Jer 15:16; Jn 14:23; 16:13; Acts 17:11; Rom 12:2, 16:25-26; Col 3:16; 2 Tim 2:15; 1 Pet 1:22; 1 Jn 2:5; 5:3-4). Remember, “God’s Word is living and active and powerful” (Heb 4:12; 1 Th 2:13; 1 Pet 1:23), it is not just a book of knowledge or carefully crafted words. The key for believers is to let the transforming power of God’s Word (the Holy Spirit) dwell in you richly (Eph 6:17; 5:18; Col 3:16); therein is how we grow in holiness and sanctification (Jn 17:17).
One of the things we must do if we are going to grow into Christlikeness is to “develop Bible-based convictions & divine perspectives” — these must be believed so strongly that they affect the way in which we live. The “convictions and values” that govern our lives, will either come from the sinful world around us, or from God’s Word — one of these two forces will impact and influence our lives more than the other; obviously, we cannot completely stop the world from influencing us, but we can limit its influence by daily and prayerfully seeking the wisdom of God in His Word. If we do not intentionally and actively seek to come under the influence of God’s Word, we will come under the influence of the sinful world around us. The impact of our culture with its heavy emphasis on materialism, living for one’s self, and instant gratification is simply too strong and pervasive for us to not be influenced by it to some degree. So we are either being drawn more and more under the transforming influence of Scripture, or we are being progressively drawn into the web of an ungodly society around us. Therefore we must continually submit our minds to the transforming influence of God’s Word, the chief instrument the Holy Spirit uses to sanctify us.

The Need for Full Dependency

The psalmist reminds us, “Unless the Lord builds the house, its builders labor in vain” (Ps 127:1). Though God is intimately involved in the building, it is equally obvious that the builders are also involved. The builders cannot put away their tools and go fishing and expect God to build the house — they must work — but they must carry out their responsibilities in “total dependence on God.” The apostle Paul put it this way: “Work out your salvation with fear and trembling… but work with the realization that you work not alone; God is at work in you both to will and to do of His good pleasure” (Phil 2:12-13). Probably the most important means of growing in a “conscious sense of dependence on Christ,” is through the “discipline of prayer” — prayer is the tangible expression of our dependence. In Psalm 119, the writer teaches us about the discipline of prayer — twenty-two times he prays to God for “help” in obeying His law. Here are just a few of them:

~Revive me according to Thy word (v. 25)
~Teach me Thy statutes (v. 26)
~Make me understand the way of Thy precepts (v. 27)
~Strengthen me according to Thy word (v. 28)
~Teach me, O Lord, the way of thy statutes (v. 33)
~Give me understanding, that I may observe Thy law (v. 34)
~Make me walk in the path of Thy commandments (v. 35)
~Incline my heart to Thy testimonies (v. 36)

Though he was ardent in his desire to obey, he recognized his dependence on God for doing it. Earnest prayer for divine enablement is essential for us as well if we are to experience spiritual growth and victory over sin. None of us are endowed with a reservoir of strength from which to draw — it is always “by the Spirit” that sinful deeds are put to death and spiritual growth is achieved. Jerry Bridges reminds us that holiness always requires “continual effort on our part” and “continual nourishing and strengthening by the Holy Spirit” (Bridges, p. 89). The chief characteristic of our sinful nature (or “flesh,” as it is called in most Bible translations), is an “attitude of independence toward God;” thus we tend out of habit to “act independently” (Rom 7:19). It is the admission of helplessness and dependence that is so repugnant to our sinful spirit of self-sufficiency… but that is precisely what needs to be acknowledged… and that happens through the discipline of prayer.
Jesus told his disciples that they needed to abide in Him, because “apart from Him they could do nothing” (Jn 15:5). Just as a branch abides in a vine by drawing all its life and nourishment from the vine, so we as believers must fully “depend on Christ” (abide in Christ) if we are to grow in holiness and live fruitful lives. We abide in Christ by cultivating intimacy with Him through prayer, reading and obeying His Word, fellowshipping with other believers, loving and serving others, and being continually conscious of our union with Him and our need to depend upon Him in all things. The maturing believer knows the more he gets to know Christ through His Word, the more intimate his relationship will be with Him…the more he will understand His will…and the more he will think His thoughts after Him. Jesus wanted His disciples to have a deep inner joy that comes from dependence upon Him; He wanted “His joy” to be theirs (Jn 15:11). Jesus taught that real, genuine joy comes by fully depending upon Him in every aspect of one’s life (cf. Rom 14:17; 15:13; Gal 5:22; 1 Th 1:6; 1 Pet 1:8; 1 Jn 1:4; Jude 1:24).

The Need for Suffering and Patience

As we look back at the children of Israel and their exit from bondage in Egypt, we see that they were actually only “eleven days” from Canaan (the Promised Land)… yet it took them “forty years” to get there! (Deut 1:2-3). Why was this? We need only look at ourselves for the answer — we traverse ground very slowly…and often have we to go back and travel the same ground over and over again! “We are slow travelers, because we are slow learners…. We, like the children of Israel, are kept back by our unbelief and slowness of heart,” writes C. H. Mackintosh in his commentary on the Pentateuch (Loizeaux Brothers, 1972, p. 603). The wonderful truth is this: our God is a faithful and wise as well as a gracious and patient Teacher. Sometimes we may think we have mastered a lesson, and as such we attempt to move on to another, but our wise Teacher knows better, and He sees the need for “deep ploughing” — As Mackintosh puts it, “He will keep us, if need be, year after year at our scales until we learn to sing” (Mackintosh, p. 604). While it is very humbling to us to be so slow in learning, it is very “gracious of God” to take such pains with us, in order to make us sure. Just as the children of Israel failed repeatedly, and stubbornly went their own way, so we too repeatedly depart from the ways of God and follow our own fleshly imaginations. Though Scripture provides us with all we need to perfect us in holiness (2 Tim 3:16-17), we are still prone to follow the devices of our own sinful inner self. Remember, the duty of a servant is simply to obey, to do as he is told, not to reason or question — he fails as a servant insofar as he exercises his own private judgment. The one grand business of a servant is to “do his master’s will” (Mackintosh, p. 607). Strange as it seems, all men are inclined to exercise their own private judgment in the things of God. The reality is, the Word of God is the only authority in heaven and earth — anything else is the rule of our conscience in direct contrast with the voice of eternal, living Word of God, Jesus Christ.

The LORD spoke the following words to His people while they were in the desert — “You have stayed long enough on this mountain…. Behold, I have set the land before you; go in and possess the land which the Lord swore to give to your fathers” (Deut 1:6-8). Thus it was with Israel in their desert wanderings, and thus it is with us. Ultimately, we are to leave all our matters in the hands of a loving Father — He is the one who arranges our movements for us, and fixes the bounds of our habitation… He tells us how long to stay in a place, and where to go next. He has charged Himself with all our concerns, all our movements, all our wants (Mackintosh, p. 611). Scripture gives us the fullest assurance that God can and does guide His children in all things — “The steps of a man are ordered of the Lord” (Ps 37:23; Prv 16:9; 20:24); “I will instruct you and teach you in the way
which you should go; I will counsel you with My eye upon you” (Ps 32:8). Thank God it is so, or we would all be left to the mere impulse of our own will — by the way, the path of self-will is sure to be a path of darkness and misery, whereas the path of obedience is a path of peace and divine favor (Mackintosh, p. 613). Why did the children of Israel stay in the wilderness? because of a “wilderness mentality;” their thoughts were fleshly, and it kept them in bondage. It was only after years of wandering that they were ready to “jettison fleshly thinking” and be “renewed in their minds:” it was only then that they were ready to take possession of their rightful inheritance.

The “renewing of our minds” takes place “little by little” — one small step at a time. The LORD told His people in the desert that He would “clear out the [godless] nations in Canaan little by little” (Deut 7:22). We don’t conquer all of our enemies in life in one swell swoop — it takes time, and it happens little by little. The apostle Peter said, “After you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace will Himself perfect, confirm, strengthen and establish you” (1 Pet 5:10). Why do we need to suffer for a little while? Because it is through suffering that we “die to ourselves” and “surrender to the lordship of Christ” — and it is only then that we fully come to appreciate the “freedom that is ours in Christ.” So in all the trials of life, God is doing His sanctifying work in us through our suffering (Ps 33:18; Prov 10:28; Rom 4:18-21; 5:5; Gal 5:5; Titus 1:2; 2:13; Heb 3:6; 6:19). Sometimes God takes His time to bring about our deliverance — it is often through a difficult period of waiting that God “stretches our faith” and lets “patience” do its perfect work (Jas 1:4). Remember, God is at work in your life and bringing about your deliverance “little by little” (Phil 1:6; 2:13); with that in mind, that should be a great encouragement to you.

The Need for Fellowship

God created us to be dependent not only on Him but on other believers as well; none of us have the spiritual wherewithal to “go it alone” in life; we all need one another (Jn 13:34; 1 Cor 12:21; 1 John 2:10-11), contrary to what many believers refuse to acknowledge. King Solomon reminds us that “as iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another” (Prov 27:17). . . and “two are better than one… if one falls down, his friend can help him up; but pity the man who falls and has no one to help him up” (Ecc 4:9-10). One of the many advantages of fellowship is the mutual admonishing or encouraging of each other in the face of temptation or attacks from Satan. That’s why the writer of Hebrews said, “Encourage one another daily, so that none of you may be hardened by sin’s deceitfulness” (Heb 3:13). . . and “Do not give up meeting together as is the habit of some; rather consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, and encourage one another” (Heb 10:24-25). The apostle Paul expressed His desire to be “mutually encouraged by another’s faith” (Rom 1:12). Historically, the church’s Apostles’ Creed speaks of “the communion of saints,” referring to both the objective community relationship and the experiential sharing of spiritual fellowship with one another. J. I. Packer, in his insightful book “God’s Words” tells us, “The Puritans used to ask God for ‘one bosom friend,’ with whom they could share absolutely everything and maintain a full-scale ‘prayer-partner relationship;’ and with that they craved, and regularly set up, group conversations about divine things” (p. 200). So the Bible not only teaches the importance of spiritual fellowship, but church history also affirms it. We must look to God to lead us to that “special person” with whom we can develop intimate fellowship — as the old Puritan adage goes, “Have communion with few, be intimate with one.” The Puritans realized the importance of genuine spiritual fellowship.
Spiritual fellowship involves the sharing of our sins and struggles and failures and discouragements, as well as our blessings and our joys. James (the brother of Jesus) told us to “confess our sins to each other and pray for each other that we might experience the healing power of the Holy Spirit in our life” (Jam 5:16). “Healing the soul” is the most wonderful healing God does in the lives of His children. Though this aspect of fellowship is threatening to most of us, we seem to forget that “no temptation has seized us that is not common to all of us” (1 Cor 10:13). The Lord Jesus gave us a new commandment the night before He went to the cross — it is that we “love one another;” that we genuinely care for one another by helping carry each other’s burdens (Jn 13:34; Gal 6:1-4; Jn 3:10, 17; 4:7-8, 20-21). It should be obvious, if we do not know the struggles another person is facing, we cannot encourage, help or pray for him in a meaningful way — by the way, genuine, heartfelt intercession is the most important ministry we can have in the life of another individual — “the prayer of the righteous accomplishes much” (Jam 5:16). The question is, do you really believe that? Furthermore, if we are not having communion with God and learning from Him, then we will have nothing to share with others — as we share our thoughts with others, we learn because we are forced to organize and develop our ideas.

It should be remembered, if you and I are going to grow spiritually, we cannot play “Lone Ranger” — we must incorporate spiritual fellowship into our Christian lives. In most cases it proceeds at the “small group” level and proceeds to grow from there. Just as you dialogue with God regarding spiritual matters, so you also need to dialogue and interact with others regarding spiritual matters; and when you do, the Holy Spirit will minister grace both in your life and through your life. Again, do you really believe this? Faith believes it and acts upon it. The Great Commandment is that we “love God and love our fellow man” — let me emphasize the fact that this is a “command,” not an optional “extra credit assignment” (Mt 22:36-39). Obviously “our responsibility” toward others in this world is an absolute in God’s economy — there are no exemptions! He didn’t make any of us self-sufficient, autonomous creatures — it is our diabolical flesh that demands independent autonomy… and it is the reason Cain selfishly responded to the Lord, “Am I my brother’s keeper?” (Gen 4:9). Scripture give us an emphatic, “Yes, you are!” (Lk 10:25-37). The selfish flesh in all of us seems to “frequently grumble” at the thought — “Why do I have to help?” Can you hear the groaning of your “sin disposition” within? Isn’t it interesting at all the ways in which it actually tries to “justify” our not getting involved, as if we have some special exemption?

The Need to Serve God

The apostle Paul tells us that “we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them” (Eph 2:10). God intends for all believers to be “active workers” in His kingdom. To this end God has assigned every Christian a function in the body of Christ, and equips each of us to fulfill that function (Rom 4:3-8). As believers we are all members of the body of Christ, and share in the common life of Christ… and as such we are to use our spiritual gifts to serve one another and build each other up in the faith (1 Cor 4:12; 7:11; 1 Pet 4:10-11). Obviously, the effective use of our gifts does not occur without diligent effort on our part. Paul’s friend in ministry, Timothy, already had the gift of teaching, yet Paul did not hesitate to urge him to “be diligent to present himself to God as a workman who could handle accurately the Word of Truth” (2 Tim 2:15). He was accountable to God for the development and use of his gift… as a teacher he had to study zealously to learn God’s truth and then had to labor diligently to communicate it in a clear and inspiring manner.
Every person has a gift to serve in some capacity and must strive to become competent and proficient in doing so. If you are not yet aware of what your precise gifts are, “get involved in various ways in your church,” and over the course of time “your giftedness” will not only become apparent to you but to others as well — why? because the Holy Spirit will “use your efforts” to minister to others. It is when “our service” bears fruit that our gifts are confirmed. If you don’t know where to start, get involved by “assisting someone in their ministry” — it will grow from there. You are responsible to take some initiative — inquire of others and get involved! As Paul said, “To this end I labor, struggling with all Christ’s energy which so powerfully works in me” (Col 1:29); though Paul “worked hard” in his labors, he “depended upon the power of Christ within” to guide and direct his efforts, and to make them fruitful and effective. We are to do the same.

Jesus reminded his disciples, “To whom much is given, much will be demanded” (Lk 12:48). The sober reality is this — one day all of us as believers are going to have stand before the “Judgment Seat of Christ,” not to be judged for our sins (Heb 10:17), but to have everything we have done in this life as believers carefully scrutinized and appraised (2 Cor 5:10; Mt 12:36; Mt 25:14-30; Rom 14:10-12; 1 Cor 3:12-15; Gal 6:7; Eph 6:8; Col 3:24-25). As a result of this judgment of our works, there will “reward” and “loss of reward.” The apostle John had some other sobering thoughts to share on this subject — “Little children, abide in Christ (walk in obedience before Him), so that you may have confidence and not shrink away from Him in shame when He appears” (1 Jn 2:28). The word “have confidence” literally means “to be able to speak” — can you even imagine “not being able to speak to Christ” when He returns to this world because of “having lived your life selfishly”? Instead you will feel such “intense shame at how you lived” that you will not even be able to “look at Christ” or “speak to Him” when He looks at you — rather you will turn away in embarrassment and shame. That is an incredibly sobering thought, and sadly for many that will be the reality. Though they are saved (1 Cor 3:15), and will spend eternity in heaven with Him, their initial entrance into Christ’s presence will be one of overwhelming shame (rather than joy) — why? because they did not submit to God’s purpose for their life — they were simply into “living for themselves.” Beloved, those are not my words, those are the words of Scripture.

Regarding the judgment seat of Christ — it is necessary for the appointment of our eternal position of rulership and authority with Christ in His role of “King of kings and Lord of lords” (Mt 20:20-23; 24:45-47; Mt 25:14-30). Each of us as His children are destined to “serve God” in some capacity in His eternal kingdom. Do you care about your eternal future? Is it really important to you? There is only “one thing” that you can do to prove that you do care — you must become intentional about your Christian life and your walk with Christ, and give it everything you have. If you don’t, you are letting your “sin disposition” run your life. End of argument. Remember, the person who wants to experience greater reward and godliness must clothe himself with humility by “serving others” (Jn 13:1-15; Lk 22:27; Gal 5:13; 6:7-10; Phil 2:5-11). One final word — in contrast to the “Judgment Seat of Christ” for the saved… the “Great White Throne Judgment” is for the unsaved of all ages (Rev 20:11-15), where different degrees of punishment will be meted out, and where they will be eternally cut off from God’s presence and His sin-cleansed universe.

The LORD said to the children of Israel when they were in the desert, “I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses — choose life that you may live!” (Deut 30:19). Likewise, He said to them, “When you pass through the waters, I will be with you… and through the rivers, they will not overwhelm you… and when you walk through the fire, you will not be burned” (Is 43:2). The apostle Paul exhorted us to “not lose heart and grow weary, for in due time and at the appointed
season we shall reap” (Gal 6:9). In other words Paul is encouraging us to “keep on keeping on!” Never quitting, because victory is certain! (Ps 138:8; Is 42:3; Phil 1:6; 1Th 5:24). By the way, the four references just underscored should be a great encouragement to your heart. Our problem as believers is that our carnal, fleshly minds have had so much practice operating freely, that it requires effort and intentionality to “choose right thinking.” Remember, we are reprogramming a very carnal, fleshly, worldly mind to think as God thinks! Impossible? No! — Difficult? Yes! But God is on our side, continually reprogramming our mind! Though we are all cooperating with God to some degree as believers, obviously we are not all cooperating with Him to the same degree. The issue in life is that we grow in grace and faith, and continue steadfastly in the battle (because that indeed is what it is)… and that means taking God’s call upon your life seriously and working at it every day… knowing that God is also at work in you (Phil 2:12-13).

This is the will of God for you — your sanctification (1 Thess 4:3)
Prayerfully and humbly make Christ your life (Phil 1:21)