BIBLICAL ESSENTIALS

GROWING TOWARD SPIRITUAL MATURITY

GARY C. NEWTON

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Growing Toward Spiritual Maturity

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Foreword

RICHARD FOSTER'S CLASSIC work *Celebration of Discipline* includes a word from the author humbly confessing the weakness of words on paper as we struggle to grasp the miracle of grace as God transforms lives. The most eloquent of scholars among us cannot completely do justice to the message of God's Word. You are strongly urged to read and study the lessons within this brief text with an open Bible at hand. Numerous Scripture references will be cited, and some will be quoted. Perhaps the Holy Spirit will call to your mind many other passages to reinforce the growth principles presented herein.

Secondly, you will note the publisher has chosen to keep the term *church* lowercase in all instances. This does not represent any diminished enthusiasm for honoring Christ's work nor His Bride. Generally, capitalization may be used to refer to the universal body of believers. This book extensively notes principles related to all believers *and* to local assemblies. In some cases, Scripture means for both to overlap. We refer you to Ryken, Wilhoit, and Longman's definition (*Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, IVP): "The church is the partial fulfillment of the kingdom of God in the here and now and serves as a primary agent of the kingdom; hence it is appropriate to apply some kingdom imagery to the church itself (e.g., Col. 1:13)." For that reason, the jockeying of capitalization has been overruled to avoid confusion.

Finally, this text and its accompanying study materials are designed to integrate the inward disciplines with our outward expressions of spiritual maturity. The author rightly cautions Christians against unbalanced attention to the fruit of the Spirit observable by others. This text is appropriately named:

Growing—because maturity is a lifelong process;

Toward—because our vision must be fixed on Christ;

Spiritual—because inward transformation determines our growth;

Maturity—because fulfillment of the Great Commission is our task.

May you find the joy of the Lord in your journey.

Yvonne E. Thigpen

1

The Dynamics of Spiritual Growth

A STRATEGY FOR growing toward Christlikeness 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 Himself.

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 difficult for Christians to believe that their continued spiritual growth is dependent on God. A subtle legalism often creeps into our lives that 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 only to save us, as important as that transformational experience is, but also 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 on 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 that 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 Christlike 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 in 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 more clear 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 standards for success are different from ours.

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 clearly 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 that 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 does not confine His assignments 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 avoid wasting 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 sprout, both good and bad plants sprang up. The farmer's servants asked him if they should get rid of the bad plants, and he 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 in 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 terms 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 (vv. 2, 3, 4, 5, 8, 18). From Galatians 5:22-23, we discover that fruitfulness is at least in part associated with the fruit 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 verse 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" (v. 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 like 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" (v. 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. This joy 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" (vv. 14-15). At 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 offer 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, work, leisure, and business. God's desire is that all His children love Him with their whole being—body, mind, and spirit (Deut. 6:5). Spiritual growth, seen in this light, is a process in which people willingly allow the Holy Spirit to control increasingly more of their lives.

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 that 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 for Israel 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."[1] 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. 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 and 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 that even Christian parents fail to live up to their biblical responsibilities. When children grow up in an atmosphere of emotional warmth and encouragement (with appropriate boundaries), they are more apt to respond to the teachings of Christ as 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 Christlikeness. Healthy local churches provide a community where people of all ages, walks of life, ethnicity, 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 belong to 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 that 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 the knowledge of Christ. When members of the body of Christ lovingly interact with one another, they become more Christlike. Each person's common relationship with Jesus Christ and the use of gifts and abilities in a significant way are what hold the body of Christ together. Analyzing this passage from an educator's perspective helps us see that 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 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 a more objective understanding of observations 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 out that 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 it. 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 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, "For 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 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 change more directly into the likeness of Christ. If our goal is to become more Christlike and to know God more intimately, suffering is inevitable. Paul makes this connection very 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 Christlikeness. God uses suffering and persecution in our lives to challenge us to higher levels of spiritual thinking and living. Seen in this light, suffering moves us closer to our goal of Christlikeness. 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. 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" (Jas. 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. This understanding will enable us to design more intentional learning strategies with those around us.

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 explain why.
3. What do you think are the consequences when a person who claims to be a Christian refuses to put forth any effort to grow?
4. Why is it that many people don't really grow until they hit a difficult obstacle in life?
5. Identify the characteristics of a class experience or a group experience that had a significant influence on your life spiritually.

2

Becoming a Disciple of Jesus Christ

BEFORE WE BEGIN TO understand *how* to become something, we must have a clear picture of *what* it is that we want to become. This chapter describes first what a disciple is and then what it means to become a disciple of Jesus Christ.

WHAT IS A DISCIPLE?

The word *disciple* comes from the Greek word *mathetes*, meaning "learner, pupil, follower, or apprentice." This same Greek root is used for *math*, meaning "to learn." Thus, *mathematics* is understood to mean "thought accompanied by endeavor."[1] To become a disciple, therefore, means to follow someone and to learn from the person. An apprenticeship involves imitating one's master teacher. The process of how we learn or how we become like another person is at the very heart of the process of becoming a disciple.

Scripture uses the term *disciple* in different ways, depending on the context. At least eight different uses of the term are found throughout the Old and New Testaments:

1. *Followers of a leader*—Those who followed various leaders like Moses, John the Baptist, rabbis, Pharisees, and Jesus (John 1:35, 37).

2. *Various types of followers of Jesus*—The gospel writers describe general followers (Luke 6:13), serious believers (John 9:27), Joseph of Arimathea (Matt. 27:57), Ananias (Acts 9:10), Dorcas (Acts 9:36), and large groups of interested seekers (Luke 6:17).

3. *The apostles*—Often used in a formal sense to mean "the twelve," the specially chosen leaders that Jesus appointed to be closest to Him

and to lead the Great Commission after His death, resurrection, and ascension (Luke 6:13).

4. *Superficial, shallow, or simply curious followers*—People with a casual level of commitment to Jesus. When He says something they do not like, they leave Him. In this case, the usage may be similar to students in a modern classroom who are physically present in class but not serious about learning (John 6:60, 64, 66, 71).

5. *Known traitors with false motives*—Probably one of the most controversial personalities is Judas Iscariot. Interestingly, he is named as both a disciple and a member of "the twelve" (John 12:4).

6. *Sincere followers who made serious mistakes and failed often*—This is where we find Peter. Although he was committed from the heart to follow Jesus, he made many serious mistakes (Luke 22:31, 32, 57, 60-62).

7. *Jesus' exclusive use of the term "my disciple"*—From the beginning of His ministry, Jesus began to create, through modeling and teaching, a unique picture of what His disciples should be like. That distinctive picture is developed through stories, parables, illustrations, sermons, and question-and-answer sessions. The further He gets into His ministry, the more precisely He describes what it means to be *His* follower. At several times in His ministry, Jesus intentionally challenged large groups of curious followers to consider the cost of being a *true* follower. By analyzing what Jesus says are the characteristics of "my disciple," we gain a clearer picture of what He considered the major distinctives of His definition.

The first time Jesus is recorded using the term "my disciple" is in Luke 14:25-33. He had just finished telling the parable of the great banquet, indicating that the kingdom of God was going to include many who were not originally expecting to come. Multitudes were following Him who apparently were not serious about Jesus' mission. Jesus seems to be thinning out the crowds by teaching what it means to be "my disciple." In this passage, Jesus identifies three principles to follow to be His disciple. A person must:

1. Love Christ far above all other human relationships (v. 26).
2. Follow Christ even if it means suffering and death (v. 27).
3. Give everything to Christ (v. 33).

Jesus makes it clear that to follow Him, they must commit their whole self to Him. A disciple puts the relationship with Jesus Christ above every other relationship, follows Christ no matter what the cost, and gives everything (spiritual gifts and skills) for the kingdom of God.

Three other texts that record Jesus' use of "my disciple" describe evidences of a *true* disciple. The first of the three texts is John 8:31-32: "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." The phrase "hold to" is translated in other biblical versions as "abide" or "continue." Jesus challenged "the Jews who had believed him" to become His disciples by "holding to" or "continuing in" His teaching. Apparently Jesus saw a significant difference between those who merely listened to His teaching and those who lived by or obeyed His teaching. True disciples would continue to live by the principles Jesus taught. Obedience to Jesus' teaching is at the heart of being a disciple of Jesus.

The second text relating to evidence of being a disciple is found in John 13:34-35. True disciples model the same kind of love that Christ showed them. Love is the test of a true disciple.

Again in John 15:8, Jesus gives us a third test of a true disciple. The context is the illustration of the vine and the branches. Jesus says, "This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit." This statement indicates that others will recognize true disciples by the fruit in those disciples' lives.

A follower of Jesus, then, loves Him above all other human relationships, is willing to suffer or even die for Him, and gives everything he or she owns to Christ. A true disciple of Jesus is recognized by steadfast obedience, love, and a fruitful life. While this standard of discipleship is obviously beyond any standard we can achieve on our own, Christ establishes it as our goal. Jesus' standard of discipleship must be the standard for the church today.

8. *The term* disciple *changes to* Christian—The term *disciple* was commonly used in the early church until the beginning of Paul's ministry. After the first persecution in the early church, the stoning of Stephen, the disciples scattered all over the Mediterranean world. As the church grew in the Greek city of Antioch, Barnabas was sent from Jerusalem to teach the new believers. He, in turn, called Paul to help him instruct the rapidly growing Gentile church there. It was in Antioch that the disciples were first called Christians (Acts 11:26).

We can only speculate as to the reasons for the change in terminology for Jesus' followers. Some scholars have suggested that the Gentile believers wanted a name that was not associated with the distinctive Jewish culture. Others suggest the terminology could have been changed to eliminate ambiguity associated with the more general term

disciple. Perhaps the use of *Christian* may have been seen as more descriptive of who they were following. Within the Roman world, *-ian* added to the end of a proper name signified giving total allegiance to that person. Thus *Christian* became a very clear term connecting absolute loyalty with Christ. Used in this way, *Christian* seems more clear than *disciple*.

Whatever the reasons for the change, *disciple* was not used again in the New Testament after the book of Acts. Throughout the early church period until the time of the Roman emperor Constantine, the word *Christian* carried the same distinctive meaning that was associated with Jesus' use of "my disciple." Many Christians died for their faith at the hand of Roman authorities. To be a Christian meant a willingness to give everything for Jesus, even life itself. Persecution and suffering only served to make Christians stronger.

After Constantine declared Christianity to be the official religion of the Roman Empire, the term *Christian* began to lose its distinctive biblical meaning. Christianity grew more politically correct and lost its radical edge. From that time until now, the number of people who call themselves Christians has increased dramatically, but the standard for a true Christian has lowered drastically. A solution for some theologians today has been to use the term *Christian* to describe the "entry level" believer and to use the term *disciple* only for the "serious Christian." Unfortunately, this only leads to more confusion. The terms *Christian* and *disciple* must never lose their original meanings. The accurate picture of a disciple of Jesus must be clearly ingrained in our minds.

Becoming a Disciple of Jesus

Another key to understanding how we grow into mature disciples of Jesus Christ is to realize that it is a process. The initial process begins with an integration of all eight of the spiritual growth principles discussed in the last chapter. Although the early stages of growth may be hard to see, God produces great things from small beginnings. The key to continued growth as a disciple of Jesus is in the quality of our relationship with Him. That relationship is defined by the attitude of our heart rather than external rituals and duties. Growth begins inside and spreads to encompass our whole life. Relationships with other like-minded followers of Jesus serve as catalysts to this growth. God may even use discouragement, persecution, or suffering to strengthen our faith.

Spiritual growth, much like the physical process, matures through normal stages. Various denominations and church traditions may call these stages by other names or emphasize them differently. Yet most people move through them in similar patterns. The process of spiritual growth involves at least four stages.

Stage 1—Prenatal Care

Before each of our three boys was born, we provided the best prenatal care possible. Their mother disciplined herself with a regimen of regular trips to the doctor, vitamins, and a strict diet. Mom and Dad prayed for each child's arrival and even played soft music to provide a calm, relaxed environment. Prenatal care is an important stage in the growth of a healthy newborn.

In a similar way, God the Father prepares for each child's birth into His family. He orchestrates (naturally or supernaturally) different events, people, and circumstances in the life of a "believer-to-be" in preparation for the person's "new birth." A good example of this can be found in 2 Timothy 1:5 and 2 Timothy 3:14-15 as Paul reflects on the process of how Timothy became a Christian. As you read this account of God's work in Timothy's life, it is important to note that even though Timothy's father was apparently absent, God provided other significant adult models in his life.

Stage 2—New Birth

Becoming a disciple of Jesus, or a member of God's family, begins with what Jesus called the "new birth." When Jesus told Nicodemus, a religious leader, that "no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again" (John 3:3), he meant that every person must be transformed into a child of God by the Spirit. Becoming a disciple (or Christian) is not a process of natural education or reformation whereby a person changes his or her beliefs and behaviors. It begins at a turning point in a person's life when one responds to God's invitation.

Jesus explained this turning point in different ways. In Matthew 18:3 He says, "unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." In Mark 10:21 Jesus says to a man preoccupied with his wealth, "Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me." To a teacher of the Jewish law Jesus responded to his inquiry

about the greatest commandment by stating, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength," and "Love your neighbor as yourself" (Mark 12:30-31). Jesus phrased His invitations in various ways, depending on needs and reservations, and yet one theme is clear. Followers were asked to make a radical commitment to follow Him, thus allowing them to begin their pilgrimage with Jesus possessing a faith as small as a mustard seed. This small faith directed toward a powerful God accomplishes great things.

Phrases such as "becoming a Christian," "becoming Jesus' disciple," and "being born again" all refer to the same event—a supernatural work of God in a person's life that transforms him or her. This experience of conversion begins with a change in the heart, rooted in a person's emotions, intellect, and will. The transformation will take a lifetime to fully affect every aspect of one's life.

Stage 3—Becoming More Like Christ

Conversion brings immediate and instantaneous holiness as the new believer is now justified, credited as righteous, in the eyes of God. This has nothing to do with human goodness. It is totally based on Christ's sacrifice on the cross for sins. This is what Scripture records as being saved by grace (Rom. 3:22-26; 5:8; 8:1; Eph. 2:8-9). Paul makes clear in Romans 12:1-2 that sanctification, on the other hand, is a lifelong process of being changed into Christ's likeness.

The born-again believer has a supernatural desire to follow Jesus and obey His Word in response to God's grace. I have yet to see, however, a believer who lives in perfect obedience. If this were possible, we would not continue to need the sacrifice of Jesus (1 John 1:8-10). Walking in fellowship with the Lord means striving to live in obedience to His Word in everything we do, think, and say. To fail, intentionally or unintentionally, requires obedient confession of our sin to our Savior and claiming of His complete forgiveness.

The desire for instant spirituality or instant holiness, in practical experience, has led many Christians into despair or depression. There is no instant spiritual experience or secret doctrine that provides a shortcut to Christlikeness. The apostle Paul confessed he had not "already been made perfect" (Phil. 3:12). When Paul said this, he had been a Christian at least twenty-five years, completed three missionary journeys, and written nine of the New Testament epistles. Three verses

later Paul includes himself among those who are "mature." He knew that maturity is never absolute. Growing toward Christlikeness is a lifelong adventure.

Fortunately God has given us all the resources we need to live a victorious Christian life (2 Pet. 1:3) in the person, the power, and the gifts of the Holy Spirit. Just as the initial gift of the Holy Spirit revolutionized the early church, He wants to transform the hearts and lives of believers today. Most believers would confirm the fact that the Holy Spirit dwells in them, but some fail to experience the day-to-day reality of being "filled with the Spirit" (Eph. 5:18). In this text Paul commands believers to continually be filled with the Holy Spirit. Jesus told His disciples before He left that they would do even greater things than He did. The Holy Spirit plays the most significant role in enabling and empowering the new believer to become more like Jesus Christ (Rom. 15:16; Gal. 5:25; Eph. 3:16).

Stage 4—Becoming a Perfect Reflection of Christ

Some describe the disciple's life on earth as a pilgrimage to become more like Christ. There will be a time when the pilgrimage ends and the believer is transformed into the perfect likeness of Jesus (1 John 3:2). Theologians call this glorification. Paul foretold this event in Romans 8:29 when he said, "those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son." This final and complete transformation experience is the goal of the disciple's pilgrimage. Even though growing spiritually on earth may involve suffering, hardship, sacrifice, and failure, the final reward will be worth the struggle (Phil. 3:14). This ultimate prize of Christlikeness for all eternity should be the vision that keeps the Christian pilgrim focused throughout the earthly journey.

Summary

Throughout church history, particularly in the midst of persecution, Christians have looked forward to the living hope of one day seeing Christ in glory. That hope carries with it the sure expectation of an inheritance that far surpasses the value of the greatest earthly treasure. The joy of eventually being like Christ and reflecting His radiant glory gives Christians a clear vision even in the midst of suffering, failure, and difficulty.

When Christ called men and women to follow Him, He never hid

the cost. In fact, Jesus went out of His way to explain the radical nature of His standards for discipleship. But the cost was negligible compared to the glory to be revealed when His followers would actually become like their master. To become His disciple, Jesus taught that one's whole self must commit to loving and obeying Him.

The term *Christian* replaced the term *disciple* in the early church, and both terms initially implied radical commitments. But gradually the term *Christian* began to lose this distinctive biblical meaning. Nurturing the soul through at least four stages of spiritual development ultimately achieves a prize for the faithful follower of Jesus Christ.

For Further Discussion

1. What was your understanding of the difference in terminology between *Christian* and *disciple* before reading this chapter? How has it changed?
2. How do you react to the explanation of the possible reasons why the terms were exchanged?
3. Using today's language, how do you think Jesus would explain to someone how to become His follower?
4. In what ways does our future glorification give us hope in the midst of suffering?

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