

God's call to all Christians: Grow in Christ

Most believers are familiar with terms such as the general call of the gospel, an invitation, or an altar call. These terms rightly understood indicate something about God. He draws attention to Himself and what He has in store for His people. He does not restrict His kingdom to a class, race, country or nation (Rev. 5:9-11). Most people connect God's call to the urgency and necessity of salvation.

There is another call from God that we encounter in Philippians 2:12-13: Therefore, my dear friends, as you always have obeyed – not only in my presence but in my absence – continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and act according to his good purpose. Here Paul captures God's call for growth in Christlikeness. Paul is speaking to believers – saved people. He makes clear that salvation carries with it duty but also privilege and blessing. His statement, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, forced his readers to consider what salvation is, and what they were to think, to desire, and to do as saved people. Since the whole person is changed at salvation, Paul encouraged his readers in the joy of their salvation – thinking God's thoughts, desiring what God desires, and doing what pleases God.

Working out one's salvation (or solutions to problems which every church and every individual has) requires human individual effort. The believer is to be God's agent to accomplish God's goal of becoming more like Christ, individually and corporately. Paul is reminding his readers that at regeneration they were supernaturally and radically changed (John 3:3-8). They had become like Christ in principle but not in practice. Prior to God's saving work they lived in God's world as if it was their own. They had created their own world – a virtual reality – based on their own self-pleasing thoughts and desires. In their own world (the "you" and the lifestyle before salvation), they habitually opposed God in varying degrees and in a variety of ways. Such is the depths of the cesspool of wickedness from which every believer has come (Eph. 2:1-3; Rom. 3:9-19; 8:5-8). The bad news is truly horrible. However, the good news (salvation) is surpassingly and incredibly wonderful! Paul was issuing a call to progressive sanctification – personal holiness. He called his people to holiness and not happiness. Happiness depends on circumstances and holiness depends on a person's response to the God of circumstances. Paul called for a renewal and not relief, and progress not self-pleasure. He called them, in part, to be changing, because they were the most changed people in the universe and God was not through with His people.

What are some reasons a person would not work out his salvation? It may be ignorance. Some may simply "think" life is about salvation and nothing more. They may go to church, pray, tithe, and even evangelize. The Pharisees did all of those things. Some may not know change is a fundamental characteristic of the Christian. Some may not know how to change. Another reason for not working out one's salvation may be the person's divided heart (James 1:5-8; 4:8). The person may still yearn for his previous self-pleasing lifestyle. A common feature of these reasons is ignorance of both the good news and the bad news.

Believer, it is always wise to remember what salvation is in terms of being saved from what and from who AND saved for what and by whom. In order to accomplish this, you must remember what you were in Satan – you were outside of Christ without hope. You must remember what you are in Christ. Reflect on who you are saved from – God as Judge, self, Satan, and sin. Yet, you were saved by God for Him. Also remember and reflect on the cost of salvation – to God. Focus on the privilege and blessing of salvation that leads to working out your own salvation with fear and trembling. When you do you will be tasting the goodness of God (Ps. 34:8)

Application:

1. Review salvation as given above.
2. Ask yourself: what is the "big deal" about salvation? What do you learn about God and about yourself.
3. Write out specific ways you will work out your salvation – what that will look like in terms of changing thinking, wanting, and doing.

Growth in Christ: Part 1

Growth in Christ is shorthand for the term theologians call progressive sanctification. Other terms for growth in Christlikeness include growing in wisdom and knowledge, trusting and obeying, dying to sin and self and living to God, and putting off and putting on. These terms and others depict life after salvation. Once saved the believer is called to become more like Christ in thoughts, desires, and actions. He does as he puts off old patterns of thinking, wanting, and acting AND puts on Holy-Spirit motivated and directed thinking, wanting and doing. The answer to question #1 of the Westminster Shorter Catechism gives us some help. The chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever. The answer emphasizes a proper vertical reference for all of life (Matt. 22:37-40). The believer is to live heavenly-minded so he can be of earthly-good. See Colossians 3:1-3 and 1 John 3:1-3. Moreover, one of God's primary purposes for creation and redemption is for man to dwell in His holy presence. After Adam and Eve were exiled from the Garden and God's presence, a real question arose. Was man to be allowed into God's presence, and if so on what basis? God's yes is recorded in the Bible initially in Genesis 3:15. The battle of the seeds (the woman's vs. Satan's) ensued: light vs. darkness, truth vs. error, wickedness vs. righteousness, and God's way vs. Satan's way. Evidence of this battle is seen in the world but is also demonstrated within the heart of every person. The bottom line is the age-old question of who you will serve. God posed this question to Adam and Eve in the Garden. Joshua posed this question to the Israelites (Joshua 24:14-15). It is the question posed to Christ by Satan in the wilderness (Matthew 4; Luke 4). It is the question posed to everyone daily especially the believer. After salvation, for the believer, there is war within (Gal. 5:16-18). In His time, God fulfilled His initial promise made in the Garden. Man was brought back into God's presence through the work of the God-man Christ Jesus. The Old Testament ritual system pointed to Christ's once-for-all sacrifice. A picture of sacrifice mediated by a special priesthood is throughout the Old Testament but especially after God met Moses at Mount Sinai. God ordained a sacrificial system and a priesthood to mediate the perpetual offering of a holy, harmless, undefiled sacrifice. This was ultimately fulfilled in and through the perfect, once-for-all work of the great High Priest Jesus Christ (Heb. 7:23-27; 9:9-10; 10:19-25). Moreover, He is the perfect sacrifice – the true Lamb of God (John 1:29, 36). His active obedience and law keeping and His perfect death on the cross was the source of redemption for every believer. The believer was saved and he has work to do. God called him to grow in Christlikeness (2 Cor. 5:9; 1 Thess. 4:1-3; 2 Peter 3:18). He was to develop the character of Christ. In later blogs we will discover just what that phrase means.

Application:

1. Read John 3:3-8.a. What did Jesus expect Nicodemus to know?
b. Where would that knowledge come from?
c. What was Nicodemus to do with that knowledge?
2. John 6:60-64 helps you answer the above questions:
a. The knowledge is supernatural knowledge – it is Holy Spirit derived (1 Cor. 2:16).

- b. It is coupled with saving faith so that faith is informed and intelligent.
- c. Compare this faith with the faith of the demons: James 2:19. What do you learn?

Growth in Christ: Part II

In one sense growth in Christ can be summarized in terms of fear of the Lord. Fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom (Prov. 1:7; 9:10). It is the dominating awareness of Who God is, who you are, and how all of life is vertically and horizontally related. It focuses on Who God is as Creator, Sustainer, Controller, and Deliverer of His world and His people. It emphasizes God's power (totally and completely sovereign), wisdom and knowledge (infinite in His wisdom), and goodness and love (perfect in His love).

Growth in Christlikeness requires knowledge that is properly applied with the right motivation for thinking, wanting, and doing (Matt. 7:24-27; Titus 1:1). The whole person is involved in regeneration and in sanctification. We grow in understanding God and self and in the application of this truth as we live and breathe and have our existence in the Triune God (Acts 17:24-31).

Several non-negotiable truths all essential for Godly living. These truths/principles form a set of beliefs (presuppositions) and a worldview. First, God is God and you are not. Simple and yet profound. Think with me as you consider the impact of that truth. At some time you will be faced with a reality of who God is. Second, God is the ever-present, all powerful Creator and Controller of His world. Third, in His BIGNESS, God is good, powerful, and purposeful. Fourth, believers were designed in eternity past to be in Christ (union with Him) for the purpose of being like Christ in anticipation of dwelling in God's presence eternally (see Eph.1:4).

Our God has revealed these truths for His glory and the good of His people which is another non-negotiable truth. God's power and purpose are supremely manifested as He brings His people and creation into another sphere of reality and existence. The believer is regenerated by the supernatural and radical work of the Holy Spirit in the believer's heart. The Spirit indwells the individual believer and the church. In a real sense, the believer and the church are the most changed persons on earth – another non-negotiable truth. Consequently, the believer and the church is expected to become more like Christ – another non-negotiable truth (Rom. 8:28-29; 2 Cor. 3:18; 5:9; Eph. 4:11-14). Growth in Christlikeness is a duty, privilege, and blessing. It is a remarkable adventure initiated, developed, and continued by God the Spirit.

Growth in Christlikeness begins with a right knowledge of the origin, destiny, identity, and purpose of the God-man Jesus and one's self. Throughout the gospel of John, John records Jesus' emphasis on Jesus' correct knowledge of His of origin and His destiny. This was in contradistinction to the Jews (John 6:41-43, 52; 7:27, 35, 41-42; 8:19, 22, 52-53). These people had ears but did not hear and eyes but did not see. They had no fear of God. Believers are to grow in fear of the Lord.

Application:

1. Define fear of the Lord.
2. Knowledge of God and self are linked. How does that truth help you apply Matthew 22:37-40 daily?
3. How would you describe the character of Christ? See Ps. 40:6-8.

Growth in Christ: Part III

In an earlier blog, I reviewed man's dilemma after God's judgment post-fall. Adam and Eve were expelled – exiled – from the Garden as self-centered rebels and wanderers. God removed man from

His presence. However, from the beginning God implemented His cosmic plan. God would bring a people into His presence. The questions raised include when and how. Man's expulsion from the Garden was the first exile. If God was to be covenantally faithful, an exodus from man's darkness and bondage must occur. A personal and corporate exodus did come. This was pictured in the Old Testament by God's deliverance of Israel from Egypt. This event was to be perpetually remembered (Exodus 12:14-17, 24-27; 13:14; 20:1-2). It was a pattern of God's saving grace throughout all ages. God established a sacrificial system mediated by the high priest. This system – priest, sacrifice, and ritual – pointed to Christ, the perfect Lamb of God and His bloody death (1 Cor. 5:7; Heb. 7:27). However, unlike the lamb, the crucified Savior rose from the grave as the Conqueror. His resurrection ushered in the new exodus and true resurrection life for each individual and the church. Unless there was a new exodus there would have been no historical exodus.

A radical change must occur in man – not in God – in order for God to bring man into His presence. God accomplished this change in Christ through His work as prophet and priest. The Holy Spirit brings about a change in individuals and the church via His indwelling (Rom. 8:9,11; 2 Tim. 1:14; 1 Cor. 3:16; 2 Cor. 6:14ff; 1 Peter 2:5ff). This initial radical change is termed regeneration. The magnitude, radical-ness, and comprehensiveness (whole person) of the change is divinely supernatural. The believer's and the church's change is to continue on this earth. This continuation is termed progressive sanctification.

Up to this point many believers would be tracking. Many think of themselves as growers. Two vital questions must be addressed regarding growth: how is it to be done and by what motivation? The how of becoming more like Christ is spelled out in many passages including Romans 13:12-14; Ephesians 4:22-24 and Colossians 3:8-10. Each of these passages emphasize "putting off " and "putting on." This change process involves the whole person. It focuses on changed thoughts, desires, and actions concerning God, self, and others. There is to be a replacement of one thought, one desire, and one action at a time. The person is putting on God-pleasing in lieu of self-pleasing. The motivation for change focuses on God. He expects and deserves change as the believer develops the character of His Son. Each believer at regeneration had a radical inner-man (heart) operation and change. God the Holy Spirit is the 100% -agent of change (John 3:3-8). In other words salvation is totally of the Lord (Jon. 2:9). The person contributes nothing to his salvation. Understanding this truth is critical to growth in Christ.

As a supernaturally-changed person via the Holy Spirit, the believer has more invested in him by God than the believer has invested in himself. The believer is united with Christ by faith, has the indwelling Holy Spirit, and has the revealed, written Word of God. Out of a real sense of who God is, he embraces who he is in Christ and sets out to please God simply because God is God. He acknowledges that God deserves his devotion and obedience. Also, the believer has a changed view of himself: he is saved from God by God; he is saved from sin and Satan; and he is saved from himself. Out of an awe for who God is and with gratitude for what God in Christ has done to and for him, he will put off self-pleasing habits of thinking, wanting, and doing. He will put on – one thought, desire, and action at a time – God-pleasing thoughts, desires, and actions.

Application:

1. Meditate and pray through the above truths.
2. Rejoice in your salvation.
3. According to Hebrews 4:12, make an honest spiritual inventory including the major ways (be specific) that you are a self-pleaser. Ask your spouse or mature Christian friend to critique the list.
4. Commit to replacing those thoughts, desires, and actions with God-pleasing ones.

Growth in Christ- Part IV

In progressive sanctification (growth in Christlikeness), there is to be a progressive pattern of “put off” and “put on.” God is still 100% active, but the believer is 100% active as well. (see Phil. 2:12-13 and 1 Thess. 4:1-3). The believer is to exercise (give evidence of) his heart change by putting off old habits of self pleasing, self trust, and self worship. These were developed while as an unbeliever in Satan’s kingdom and family. Life as an unbeliever is one of running from God to self in order to do one’s “own thing.” Until salvation each person lives in his own world as much as he can. He creates his own virtual reality which competes with God. This rebellion can be very pronounced in some people while subtle in others. Either way it is anti-God rebellion. Habits of thinking, wanting, and doing as a self-pleaser are controlled by the “I want” and “I deserve” These patterns are carried over into person’s life as a believer.

So what does growth look like? Although the specifics will differ per person, there is a common thread of growth in all believers. There will be change in regard to God, self, and others. When a person thinks about God differently he relates to himself and others differently. The vertical reference controls the horizontal reference of life. Enmity and dissatisfaction with God, twin characteristics of life in Satan’s kingdom, are replaced by a desire to come and taste God and His goodness (Ps. 34:8). Thoughts and desires change. God is God and you are not. He deserves to be honored, served, and worshipped; you do not. Actions follow. You move toward God because He has moved toward you and indwelt you with His Holy Spirit.

A changed view of God, self, and others results in hunger for His Word and its application. The changing person will be quicker to rely upon and follow biblical principles daily. This is in contrast to being motivated by feelings, experiences, and logic removed from biblical truth. Therefore, concrete actions follow. For instance, rather than responding with sinful fear, sinful anger, depression, and worry in any situation, you recall such passages as Psalm 46:10 (Be still and know I am God). This is God’s world; control is His business not yours; honoring Him is your duty, privilege, and blessing. You then return good for evil, consider others more important than self, and provide a gentle answer (Rom. 12:17-21; Phil. 2:3-5; Prov. 15:1).

Moreover, following Ps. 119:9-11 you continue to develop a faith-in-action plan – a biblical template – that is at your ready when tempted to please self. According to Heb. 4:12 and James 1:22 you have developed a list that includes what, when, where, how, and why it is easy for you to please self. These are times that you are to be diligent and function as a Christian oyster (2 Cor. 5:7, 9). The oyster uses irritations to make a pearl. The Christian’s pearl is growth in Christlikeness. You will be excited about individual growth because it fits God’s program of corporate (church) and cosmic regeneration.

Ironically, change is a foundational cornerstone for the Christian even though he has an unchangeable God. The believer will embrace change as God’s appointed means to bring about the reality of the new heavens and the new earth.

Application:

1. What kind of Son was Jesus? Was pleasing His Father simply duty? How does John 4:31-34, Heb. 12:1-3, and John 17:1-5, 24-26 help answer these questions?
2. Articulate succinctly the bad news and the good news of the gospel and determine how that knowledge stimulates you to please God.
3. Read Ps. 40:6-8 and Heb. 10:5-7. What do you learn about Christ and how does that motivate you?

Growth in Christ: Part V

The rationale for growth in Christ focuses on God's redemptive work and His faithfulness in working out His plan. The believer is the most changed person and is to be the most changing person.

Growth is one of the greatest privileges and blessings this side of heaven. Moreover, eternally the believer will continue to grow in his perfected state and family status as a God-pleaser and worshipper. John, in 1 John 3:1-3, describes this as amazing!

Growth in Christ is relational. It is initiated by God's relationship with every believer through Christ and is developed by the Holy Spirit. Throughout his 13 letters, Paul emphasizes union with Christ by the use of the phrase, in Christ. By it Paul means that Christ has united Himself to the believer and the believer is united to Christ. These are unbreakable relationships formed by God at salvation. God will never change what He has done in His Son (Rom. 8:32-34).

Every person is either in Christ or out of Christ. Only the believer is in Christ. He is in proper relationship to Christ because Christ is properly related to him by virtue of salvation. The unbeliever is improperly related to Christ and Christ to him. He is in Satan's family and kingdom.

At regeneration, the believer is put into Christ – into a proper relationship to Him. At the same time, he has been radically transferred from Satan's kingdom and family into God's (Col. 1:13). Therefore, the believer develops more of the character of Christ daily – he grows in Christlikeness. Yet he can and does function as if he is not in Christ. At times he will be motivated by self-pleasing habits learned and practiced while as a member of Satan's kingdom and family. Habits and their motivation die hard (Proverbs 5:21-22; 26:11). The believer is called to put off self-pleasing and its expression daily.

Growth in Christ is rational. Being in Christ means that the believer thinks God's thoughts and trusts and obeys. In fact, the believer recognizes this mindset and the resultant activity as the most reasonable way to honor and worship God (Rom. 12:1-2). Previously the unbeliever thought Satan's thoughts. He desired to please himself as he suppressed the truth of God in his ungodliness (Rom. 1:18-20).

The suppressing activity learned so well in Satan's kingdom will be replaced by the believer with truth known and truth applied. One such truth is the simple but profound fact: God is God and you are not (Pss. 24:1-2; 46:10). The believer has a new capacity to reinterpret facts, himself, others, and circumstances according to biblical truth. This is key: the truth will set you free (John 8:31-32). How? Truth is a Person, Jesus Christ, and the written Word, the Bible (John 14:6; 17:17). The believer has a new interpretative grid. He will consider and act upon these three non-negotiable truths previously discussed. They are quite simple yet profound: God is big and the believer is small; this is God's world; and God is the Rule Maker for His glory and the good of His people. However, truth and biblical principles alone are not freeing. It is application of that truth that is key. Wisdom is the application of biblical truth for the purpose of godliness and growth in Christlikeness (Proverbs 1:7; Titus 1:1; Matt. 7:24-27).

Growth in Christ is religious in nature. Man was created a religious, worshipping being. He was designed to serve and worship the Creator. True worship is not only an act of the will based on proper knowledge of God and man, but it is to be motivated by a desire to please and honor God. At salvation man was saved in order to worship God in spirit and truth (John 4:24).

Yet his habituation to self-worship and self-pleasing, learned as an unbeliever, competes with his worship of God alone. Knowing the bad news that every believer was a hell-deserving sinner destined for misery in this life is essential for growth in the character of Christ. An aspect of the bad news is summarized in Proverbs 4:18-19 (in contrast to the believer, the unbeliever is in darkness but

is satisfied with and ignorant of his darkness) and Proverbs 13:15b (those who fail to know and apply biblical principles are destined for misery and hardness in his present life). In part, this is what every believer was saved from.

Proper understanding of the gospel requires knowing both the bad news and the good news. The good news describes what the sinner was saved to: a relationship with God in Christ by the indwelling, active Holy Spirit. As a child of God the believer is called to please God. The only way to please God is to become more like Jesus Christ. Growth in Christ is one outworking of salvation. The believer is saved in order to please and worship God. Being pleased – satisfied and contented – as one pleases God may be a byproduct and result of pleasing God. But pleasing God to get something can never be the primary motive for pleasing Him (Matthew 6:33).

Application:

1. Write out your habits of self pleasing in terms of thoughts, desires, and actions. Be specific. Think in biblical terms. For instance, you may say "I am selfish." Write out the specifics of your selfishness.
2. Then using Ephesians 4:22-24 and Colossians 3:8-10 write out specific put ons – biblical thoughts, desires, and actions – that you will put in place of self-pleasing habits.
3. Read Titus 1:1 and Matthew 7:24-27: what do you need to think, to desire, and to do as one growing in Christlikeness?

Growth in Christ: Part VI **Every Believer: A Functional Christian Oyster**

The Holy Spirit makes use of various figures of speech to make a point. One example is a metaphor. The Bible uses words in a metaphorical sense to emphasize comparison. The idea derived from one object is carried over to another object. The metaphor is a comparison by direct assertion. A few examples from the New Testament include Herod as a fox (Luke 13:32), the people as a flock of sheep (Luke 12:32), and Jesus as the Good Shepherd and His people as sheep (John 10:16). Certainly Herod was no literal fox, the people were not a flock of sheep, and Jesus was not a literal shepherd. We must be careful when using any figures of speech including metaphors. The word being compared may not be in the original language and it may be used out of context. Man is not an animal, certainly no oyster. I prefer to convey the idea that the Christian is to function as an oyster. Just as the oyster uses a grain of sand – an irritant – to build a beautiful pearl, the believer is to use the situation, unpleasantness and all, to make the pearl of Christlikeness. Jesus teaches this concept in John 4:31-34 and Paul teaches it in 2 Corinthians 5:9: So we make it our goal/ambition to please Him whether we are at home in the body or away from it.

The oyster was created with the capacity to take an irritant – sand – and fashion the pearl. The oyster uses the irritation (a foreign substance) provided by God. The oyster's work is not simply "life" or "the way it is." Biblically speaking, believers know that nothing just is. We have an all-controlling God Who brings all things to pass, including irritations for the oyster and His people. These irritants include unpleasantness and trouble sometimes from the sins of others and sometimes from our own sins. The believer has been changed at regeneration such that he is able to grow in Christlikeness. According to Romans 8:28-29, Romans 5:1-5; 1 Peter 1:6-7; James 1:2-4, the Christian is in the "spiritual pearl-making" business of growth in Christlikeness. This activity is not protective. Rather it is

“an offensive move.” It is what the believer was designed for in eternity past (Ephesians 1:4). It is one of the lessons of the cross. Jesus took what was evil and used it to accomplish a good God’s purpose (Gen. 50:19-21).

In a fallen world, you can expect irritations and unpleasantness and even “I don’t like” situations. The cross and a crucified holy, harmless, undefiled Savior rightly understood was one of the greatest events in all history (don’t forget the resurrection – the cross and the resurrection are the twin pillars of the gospel: 1 Cor. 15:1-4). Rightly understood God’s providence – all situations – are the context AND the tool for the believer and the church to use to grow and change. When that happens God’s kingdom is advanced and God is glorified.

Application:

1. List your irritations in order of priority and record how they are irritations.
2. Apply the truths developed and learned from Romans 8:28-29 and 2 Corinthians 5:9.
3. Record the results in terms of changed thinking and wanting in regards to God and self and the resultant actions.