

October 4, 2009

1 Pet. 2:2; 2 Pet. 3:18; 1 Cor. 9:24-27; 2 Tim. 1:7

Jackson, MI

Pastor Walt Walkowski

## GROWING AND DISCIPLINED

This morning, we are returning to a discussion of our mission and values. As we said-and will continue to say-our mission is to develop fully devoted followers of Christ. That is, we want to see people come into a saving relationship with Jesus-to accept Him as Savior and Lord-and to grow in their relationship with Him.

The question is: What is a fully devoted follower of Christ? It is, after all, one thing to have a goal. But when we don't have a common understanding of what that goal is, it can be difficult for us to reach that goal. Take for example when I ask my kids to clean their rooms. Even though we're using the same word, their understanding of clean and mine are often very far apart. Most of the time, for them, clean means barely-organized chaos. To me, clean means picked up and put away. As you might imagine, it can be very difficult for us to reach the goal of clean bedrooms with these different understandings of clean.

For this very reason we have put a list of descriptors together to answer the question of what a fully devoted follower of Christ is by providing us all with a picture of what truly following Christ looks like. And, in keeping with our values, we did not pull a list out of thin air or invent it in our imaginations, but turned to the Bible to see what it tells us Christ followers should be like.

Last week, Pastor Leo walked us through three of the descriptors. He said that fully-devoted followers of Christ are believers, are Spirit-filled and loving. This morning, we are going to look at two more of these descriptors. Today we add that fully devoted followers of Christ are growing and disciplined.

### *A Fully Devoted Follower of Christ is Growing*

Let's look at growing first. Our description says that "Those who follow Christ fully grow in grace and in their knowledge of Christ Jesus. They grow in their relationship with God: their love for God, fear of God, obedience to God, service for God, and knowledge of God. And they grow in Christ-like character: moral purity, holiness, integrity, humility, compassion, and mutual submission."

When I hear the word "growing," I automatically think of the little garden we have in our back yard. Now, I don't want to brag or anything, but I do have an uncanny ability of knowing when there are problems with what I've planted. Take for example last year, when the corn we planted reached knee-high... by September... and never got any higher. Your average weekend gardener might not have given that corn a second thought or mistakenly believed he or she had planted pygmy corn instead. But not me. I knew that short corn meant that we had a problem with the crop, and that there would be no sweet corn from the garden boiling on the stove. Then this year, when everything but the cucumbers came up through the ground within a week of planting, I wasn't puzzled, thinking perhaps that I had planted "late cucumbers" or something. I knew those cucumbers weren't going to be coming up.

In both cases, the fact that the plants did not grow the way they are supposed to-or at all, in the case of the cucumbers-clued me in to the fact that something wasn't right. When we plant seeds in the ground, we expect them to grow.

The expectation is the same for Christians, not that we should be planted in the ground, but that we should grow. The Bible describes those of us who cross the line from death to life and receive Jesus as Savior as “born again” (John 3:3) and a “new creation” (2 Cor. 5:17). We are “spiritual babies,” when we are saved, and the expectation is that we will not stay babies. James touches on this idea of growth when he talks about how our perseverance through trials can help us on toward maturity (James 1:4). Paul tells us that the goal of this growth is Christ-likeness, being like Him who saved us (2 Cor. 3:18).

There is a mindset that exists, though, that says that once a person “prays the prayer” that person is a finished product, and growth is an optional thing. I led a group for a while which had several members who had this mentality about their faith. When I began to talk about going deeper in the faith, one of the more vocal members approached me to tell me he thought I was being unreasonable. When I refused to back down, he angrily commented that perhaps not all of the group wanted to be a “spiritual giant” like me. I'm still not sure whether to take that statement as an insult or a compliment.

The writer of the book of Hebrews had a similar problem. He had a group of people who said they were Christians but were not growing. Look what he wrote, inspired by the Holy Spirit (Heb. 5:11-6:3): We have much to say about this, but it is hard to explain because you are slow to learn. In fact, though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God's word all over again. You need milk, not solid food! Anyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness. But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil. Therefore let us leave the elementary teachings about Christ and go on to maturity, not laying again the foundation of repentance from acts that lead to death, and of faith in God, instruction about baptisms, the laying on of hands, the resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment. And God permitting, we will do so.

Trust me, my words were much kinder to the person I was dealing with. The point, though, is that growth is not an optional part of the Christian life. Receiving Christ is not the end goal of being a Christian, it is the beginning of the Christian life. The end goal is Christlikeness, and if we do not progress toward that goal, we are not growing, and friends, that is not a good thing.

Still, even if we have the idea that we should be growing, we might not have an idea of where we should be growing at, or what the indicators are that we can follow, like mile markers along the freeway, that tell us when we are getting closer to our goal. The Bible gives us a number of these, which can be both helpful-because we do get an idea of the areas for growth we have-and overwhelming-because we realize we have so many areas for growth. But as we look again at what we've written in regard to growing, we can see that at the heart of this descriptor is a focus on relationship.

While the things listed here-fearing God, loving God, being morally pure and humble-are descriptions of us, they are all cultivated out of a deepening relationship with God. For example, it is difficult for us to love or be obedient to someone we know little about. Likewise, it's difficult for us to become like someone we do not know. We need to be working at and growing in our relationship with God in order to see these things come to fruition in our lives.

When I was still a pastor in training, one of the most powerful and shocking statements I heard in regard to relationship counseling is this: The relationship is either growing or it's dying. Everyone I have shared this with has been equally taken aback, but whether or not we like the

statement has little bearing on its truth. And though we probably would rather not admit it, the statement is true. There is no “treading water” when it comes to relationships.

If this is true of human relationships, it is certainly true of our relationship with God. A “we’re good” attitude does not, in fact, make our relationship with God good. In order to have a good relationship with God, we need to invest in it and prioritize it. It requires work and time. And it is in spending that time with God that we grow. Jesus “rubs off on us,” and we begin see things from His perspective and act in the ways that He does. This doesn't mean that we walk out of those encounters perfect, but it does mean that, over time, we do get better.

A fully devoted follower of Christ is growing, and becoming more like Christ all the time.  
A Fully Devoted Follower of Christ is Disciplined

The other descriptor we're looking at today is disciplined. Here's what is written in regard to fully devoted followers of Christ being disciplined: “Fully devoted followers integrate biblical disciplines into their lives such as: Bible reading and meditation, prayer, fasting, regular church attendance, and giving.”

This characteristic of being disciplined really goes hand-in-hand with growing because it answers the question of how we grow in our relationship with God. Growing up, I often heard the phrase, “It takes two to tango.” I've never danced the tango, but having been forced to watch Dancing with the Stars by my wife, I have found that a tango actually does require two people. More than that, it requires both people to dance. Both people are responsible for carrying out specific movements in a specific way and when one of them does not—nearly always the “star” who has been talked into putting his or her lack of coordination on display for all of America to see—things do not turn out well.

The same is true of our relationship with God. If our relationship with Him is going to flourish, each side of the relationship is responsible for bringing something to the relationship. I think that we can rest assured that God will fulfill His end of the bargain. But God can't dance with a wet noodle. If we are unwilling or listless in engaging with Him, the relationship will falter.

So how do we engage? What is our responsibility to our relationship with God? That's where being disciplined comes in. Spiritual disciplines allow us to connect with and deepen our relationship with God.

At the top of the list is Bible reading and meditation. Let me ask you this: How many of you have been advised at least once during your lifetime that you should read the Bible? We all know that reading the Bible regularly is important, yet many of us struggle with it. In fact, my guess is that if I went down this list, nearly every one of us would say that each of these things is important to a vital relationship with God, but would also admit we have struggled with it or are currently struggling with it. Why is that?

The easy answer is that it wouldn't be called a discipline if it wasn't going to be a challenge for us. But that's just the easy answer. It doesn't really address the heart issues that are going on underneath our struggles to connect with God. It may be that we're upset with God because we don't think He's come through for us on the things we really wanted or wanted to see happen. It may be that we think we know better than God, and that we don't really want to hear what God says because we don't want to change. It may be that we think everything else going on in our lives is more important than God, and that He'll be around when we're ready to connect. It may be that we know, deep down, who we really are despite what we may project on the outside, and we simply cannot believe that the God of the universe would want to spend time with us. It

may be any combination of those reasons... and others.

Whatever our reasons, when we allow them to interfere or interrupt our engagement in the spiritual disciplines, we only end up hurting ourselves. Not engaging in the disciplines is like not eating even though we're starving, or not drinking even though we're dehydrated. Putting off reading our Bibles, neglecting regular times of prayer and skipping church are counterproductive to our well-being.

God is not only the creator and giver of life, but He is the sustainer of it as well. A real life, a full life, a truly satisfying life can only come from Him. The disciplines are the ways in which we stay connected to Him, like branches connected to a vine (John 15:4-8). When we are regularly reading our Bibles, we are reading God's words of life for us. When we pray regularly-and by that I mean a two-way conversation, not just us going through a laundry list of requests-we are strengthened and encouraged for life. When we fast, we demonstrate to ourselves and God that He is our true sustainer. When we join together in worship weekly, we are reoriented from our time away back toward the full life that Jesus promises. When we give, we do so in support of the ministries that proclaim the Way, the Truth and the Life through word and deed and study, both for ourselves and for our community.

The disciplines connect us to Life. They are like the IV that carries essential nutrients or medications to the hospital patient. They are like the hose through which oxygen is pumped to the deep sea diver. Or using Jesus' analogy of the vine and the branches, they are what help keep the branches attached to the vine, so that we, the branches, might grow and blossom and be fruitful.

One of the biggest problems some of us face is getting started. We know we need to be in God's Word, and praying, and so on, but since it's never been a regular part of our lives, we have difficulty knowing what the first steps should be. If this is you, don't be too proud to ask for help. There is no shame in desiring to grow your relationship with God; the only shame would be to ignore it or pretend you are connecting with Him regularly when you aren't. There are a multitude of devotional materials available to help you. If you're struggling with prayer, perhaps you might incorporate one of the models for prayers, such as the Lord's Prayer or ACTS. In these things and the others listed, it's good to have someone who can hold you accountable and whom you can hold accountable as well. If your trouble is getting to church regularly and on time, give someone permission to miss you and call to see why you aren't here. For any of these things and others, if you need some direction, speak with Pastor Mike or me or someone whose Christian walk you admire. And I'm sure Pastor Leo would love to help as well once he gets back to the US.

A fully devoted follower of Christ is disciplined, engaged in practices that nourish and build the person's relationship with God.

So what does a fully devoted follower of Christ look like? A fully devoted follower of Christ is growing, both in love for God and in the likeness of Christ. And a fully devoted follower of Christ nurtures that growth by being disciplined, practicing regular Bible reading, prayer and church attendance to keep his or her relationship with God vital and living.