

Five Stages of Spiritual Development

Welcome to another Inward Authority Episode. Today we are going to be talking about how spiritual growth is a process. It is a process where we are to be very active. What we do and how we think are crucial daily elements toward our spiritual condition.

Development is a process

God's goodness and grace has glory, power, beauty, peace, and love. It is right, good, fulfilling, and productive. We can be in it. We can partake with it. We can abide in it. To do so is a process. It is a process of letting go of ungodly thoughts, character, habits, customs, traditions, and anything ungodly while adding God's spiritual character.

This process involves cooperation. It involves a shifting, changing, and adjusting of ourselves. To abide in Jesus as Jesus abided in God will require ourselves to be more of how the Bible describes God to be. To love God and who God is requires us to think a lot about God's ways.

Here are some words used in the NKJV describing spiritual development and how it is a process. We ask ourselves how we relate to these words.

Grow, mature, become, increase,

How have we grown, matured, become, or increased with God?

harden, made dull, confuse,

Have we hardened ourselves, felt dullness, or become confused?

convince, train, learn, understand, know,

Have we become convinced, trained, learned, understood, or known God's grace, righteousness, and goodness?

corrupt, cleanse, purify,

Have we experienced corruption, being cleansed or purified? Can we explain this process to others?

Our choices, thoughts, attitudes, and actions affect our development. God does not control our choices. We have free will. We have a responsibility for our choices. If our choices affect our character and spiritual conditioning, then our choices play an important role in who we are inwardly becoming. Are we giving God's Spirit a chance to help us? Are we giving our hearts and minds to obey and be with God?

Grown Dull

Did you know that we can grow dull? I've grown dull at different times in my life. It's when I lose sense of God's grace and goodness. I lose touch with love and peace. I seek after other things.

Matthew 13:15 For the hearts of this people have grown dull. Their ears are hard of hearing, And their eyes they have closed, Lest they should see with their eyes and hear with their ears, Lest they should understand with their hearts and turn, So that I should heal them.'

Turning is choice. Turning to God is a choice. We need to choose to stop our current way of doing things with our hearts and minds and turn our hearts and minds to be with God.

Growing is a process whether we are growing good or evil. In the NKJV Romans 12:9 is entitled "Behave Like a Christian" and it says, "*Let love be without hypocrisy. Abhor what is evil. Cling to what is good.*"

If we turn our hearts and minds to be with God, our minds will abhor what is evil and cling to God's good. We need to understand more what that is. We will need an increased understanding about the Bible's description of evil and good. We will need to examine and learn about God's good. This is a process of learning through action.

Matthew 24:12 And because lawlessness will abound, the love of many will grow cold.

Read psalm 119 for an example of dedication to God. As you read it, examine your own thoughts for patience and judgement. This psalm involves repetition and repetition is very important. Some of us need simple ideas repeated many times before we can get the point. It's a process.

We are to abhor evil which is lying, pride, vanity, greed, the love of money, etc. And we are to love mercy, forgiveness, peace, compassion, truth, and justice with sincerity and humility. These are the instructions and I believe as we improve with it we can learn to sense the spiritual good in it.

We are to put away falsehood and fake presentations. We are to be Godly focused people. We are to "abhor" what is spiritually evil thoughts, words, attitudes, and actions while clinging to Godly ones.

Complacency

Some of us grow toward destruction through evil ways of thinking, speaking, and acting. Others grow in saving grace. But most of us just settle in an area somewhere in between destruction and saving grace. We can have spurts of clinging to good and spurts of participating in evil. We can get a sense of what is good enough and what is too much evil.

This stuck in the middle between destruction and amazing grace can in itself grow dullness when practiced long enough. The key word here is stuck. Feeling stuck or perceiving ourselves as stuck is not good. It's not even true. The fact of the matter, is that we get stuck by our own beliefs. We get convinced we are stuck. We want to hold onto some sin while desiring God's good. We are stuck clinging to some evil which prevents us from obtaining more of God's good.

Many of us read the Bible, but few of us will take it to heart as an instruction manual. To read it as an instruction manual would involve a feeling of conviction to change. As we read instructions to forgive and have mercy our sinful minds would bring thoughts of "ya buts." We would want to do the instructions and yet not want to lose other things.

We can struggle to see how the instructions can be good because they don't fit with our current understanding. We can choose to rely upon our current understanding instead of God's instructions. The truth is, we can't understand God's instructions by merely thinking. We need to act upon the instructions and evaluate spiritual thoughts and feelings. This convincing ourselves to act upon the instructions is also a process. It only proceeds as far as we walk in them.

Being stuck over time can be very dangerous. People can isolate, feel empty, get seriously depressed, seek feeling good through addictions, or even attempt suicide. This is a very serious problem. I've met dozens of people who die alone this way. Our souls need spiritual food. The table is ready, the food is character, and or eating it involves us tasting and sensing it as we walk in it.

We need sincere connection with one another for spiritual life. We need trusting and loving relationships. This takes asking for help and giving it. It requires sharing sincere things about ourselves with others. Fear and pride are our enemies.

I created a guide called "Five Stages of Spiritual Development" to help others who may get stuck in complacency. These stages are created to validate, inform, guide, encourage, and inspire hope. It can guide us how to move out from being stuck.

If you're newer and still getting going with your spiritual journey this can help you too. As all of spiritual development, it requires an open mind. We need to set our minds to

grow, change, and abide more with God. First, let's look at the Bible for more understanding how spiritual development is a process.

Spiritual Process

The Bible is full of descriptions about growth, flourishing, living, withering, falling away, corruption and dying. It's about experiencing joy through blessings and misery through rebellion. Jesus in John 15 instructs us to abide in God. The stories in the Bible highlight that faith is a process of development. The stories demonstrate faith with action. We are to become clay for the potter to be shaped more in God's ways. We have instructions for our thoughts, attitudes, words, and actions.

James 2:17 Thus also **faith** by itself, if it does not have works, is **dead**.

We will need to journey into the instructions to experience the goodness God continues to offer. This is a process. Spiritual development toward death or life is happening right now through our choices. We are either moving towards life or towards death.

James 1:14-15

James 1:14-15 describes a process toward death. James writes, "But each one is tempted when he is drawn away by his own desires and enticed. Then, when desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, brings forth death."

Let's break down this process in James 1:14-15 into stages. These stages are incomplete and imperfect examples. James describes a process toward death. I believe it is a spiritual, emotional, and psychological death that could also result in physical death. I believe we all can suffer this death if we follow the described process. Remember, God gives us choice. We choose what actions to do. This process is a choice. We have free will to live by God's ways or suffer through other ways.

James - Stage One

Stage One is temptation and desire. When I am tempted, my mind is prompted to think about something desirable. Like many people, I like things that produce pleasure. I desire to feel good. Even thinking about it can produce a powerful inward sensation. Who wouldn't want to feel good? We all enjoy feeling good. We can get ourselves more and more excited about something through mere anticipation of a pleasurable experience.

We have a choice at what we do next. If I am being responsible with my thinking, I can choose to redirect my thinking toward something more Godly, something good for others instead of just good for me. But this requires self-discipline to deny myself this

pleasure. I may be in the midst of a flood of dopamine. It's like getting ready to take a bite out of a delicious desert and then choosing to stop and give it to someone else.

The fact is we have this powerful chemical reaction within us around food, sex, drugs, money, etc. Messages and prompts can produce a physical reaction within us. A mere thought about getting something pleasurable can produce a physical, emotional, and psychological affect. (learn about Pavlov's experiment).

This triggered affect can be powerful and it's best to respond quickly in redirecting our inward thoughts. Prayer for help can be a good idea. The quicker we redirect ourselves, the easier it will be to reduce the affects of desire and temptation. I've learned to redirect quickly my thoughts of using drugs, tobacco, etc. As soon as I get a prompt, the chemical reaction within me can begin, and begin to feel good. It can hook me. So It's best for me to just not allow myself to go there.

Spending time thinking about it can increase the power of it. Condoning this thinking behavior about the event is like feeding a lion and giving it strength. I'm not to get angry about it, but instead surrender myself quickly to God and give up the fight. I am to position myself in God's protective embrace.

I can pray to God for help. I can pray for guidance and strength. I must be willing to let go of my wants, urges, and desires. I can call someone, go to a meeting, or see how I might be able to do some good for someone else. Humbling myself is crucial.

Then there is the being "drawn away" by desire. For me, this means I am continuing to think about that which I desire and am experiencing a physical chemical reaction like Pavlov's dog salivating. My mind and body are both actually engaging with the sin and experiencing a reaction. This powerful reaction can overcome my other desires to do good. This can bring me to Stage Two.

James - Stage one part two

"When desire has conceived" may be when my mind becomes convinced to act upon the sin. Once my mind decides to do whatever it is I desire it subsequently gives up fighting the desire and seeks to fulfill the desire. Stage Two is where I choose to take action upon the desire. I give into the desire and begin taking steps to act upon it. That which I have been anticipating to do, I now do.

James - Stage Three

Stage Three is active engagement. At this point I am actively doing that which I have desired to do. I am physically involved with it. My body is fully alive in it. Birth to sin has happened. It happened and is going to happen again and again. It is repeated and becoming a part of who I am. It is growing in my thoughts and actions. It is increasingly

becoming part of my identity. I am living to do it. I seek it out, prioritize it, look forward to it, and perhaps even long to do it more and more.

James - Stage Four

Stage Four is the growing of the sin. It takes time for anything to grow. The more we grow something, the stronger it becomes. Growing sin or grace involves our active repeated participation with it. Growth in sin can involve the practice of all three stages over time. As it is practiced it grows inwardly. This obsession can slowly take over a person's life. It can grow into an addiction. It can grow into a person's top priority in life without the person even knowing it. This transformation is often a slow and gradual process. The desire for it can transform into a believed necessity. People can then choose the sin over family, God, health, money, or sanity. It can become our God.

James - Stage Five

When sin is full grown we can reach Stage Five, the bringing forth death. Death can often involve an inward miserable experience. Broken relationships, hurt loved ones, destroyed careers, legal issues, and what book Alcoholics Anonymous calls, "pitiful and incomprehensible demoralization." Page 30.

Sin being full grown means we were more focused upon filling our desires with this sin than taking care of our personal needs. We may have neglected family, health, work, school, or the law. Because of this neglect we suffered consequences. Our sanity may be in question.

Self condemnation for our choices can bring about "Learned Helplessness." We can feel powerless to change and even give up hope. This death is real and very serious.

Fortunately, there is hope. We can surrender. We can deny thoughts that seek to bring us to sin. We can imperfectly grow more each day toward what is perfect. The perfect will of God.

The solution is to look long and thorough at our choices for corrections to be made. We can examine the results we have from such choices to bring into our minds the negative consequences to help motivate us from going there. We can evaluate ourselves and our own behavior in our relationships.

We can seek God's love, mercy, compassion, truth, forgiveness, peace, etc. We can choose to be less self-seeking and more humbly and sincerely growing in God's goodness.

If we are honest and thorough with this evaluation most of us can discover that there is a direct link to growth in God's goodness and our emotional and mental condition.

Our spiritual growth can have ups and downs. We can have periods of digression toward destruction with a realization we need to change and make corrections. We can also discover a happy medium of going back and forth with our growth seemingly getting stuck in an endless cycle. Breaking the cycle will require a deeper commitment to abide more in God. This often means surrendering more of ourselves.

James in reverse

Understanding the process toward destruction can be more easily understood than the process toward construction. Just as there is a clear and distinct path toward destruction, there is a clear and distinct path toward spiritual improvement. We can grow to feel alive with God.

I imagine if James wrote a process toward life it might go something like this;

But few become ready. When they are ready they seek God's instructions and learn them with the readiness to do them. Once committed to take action upon the instructions, they immediately begin to live by them in thoughts and deeds. When the instructions are practiced in sincerity and truth they come to their senses. Through continued obedience with God's instructions, training develops and grows spiritual good fruit. They become a strong branch capable of bearing an abundance of good fruit feeding others. They continue and become filled with grace, love, peace, and joy.

Just as James 1:14-15 has stages toward death, so does the path toward life. At any point along our journey we can change our mind and seek other things. We can turn from death or we can turn from life.

Let's look closer at some of these stages to a life with love and peace. The first one is being ready to experience God's good and to be changed by it.

Stage One - Readiness

2 Corinthians 8:11 but now you also must complete the doing *of it*; that as *there was a readiness* to desire *it*, so *there also may be* a completion out of what *you* have.

In order to do anything well, we must be ready. Our hearts and minds will need to be attentive to act. Our body will need to be ready to act.

If we are going to do a footrace, we will need to be ready. We will need to be positioning our whole body toward the race. Our focus will need high attention to have our legs and feet ready to go as soon as our attentive ears sense the sound of the gun. To do God's instructions at our best, we will need to be ready, like we are in a race for God's grace. Anything that will hinder our performance will need to be dealt with. Distractions will need to be set aside, or left behind. For the purpose of our doing well we will need to give our all. (Acts 20:24, 1 Cor. 9:24, 2 Timothy 4:7, Heb, 12:1)

Stage Two Learn Instructions

We must learn to walk before we learn to run. We must learn to stand before we learn to walk. We must learn to crawl before we learn to stand and on and on. There is a lot of learning in the most basic things that we do. This too with God's love. God's love is not about resentment, doubt, anxiety, fear, worry, nor self-condemnation. It's not about self-seeking, vanity, lust, greed, or gluttony. We will need to learn to discern as we walk more and more with God's love and sincere truth. Like a child learning to walk and falling, we too will make mistakes.

Luke 1:6 And they were both righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless.

Romans 8:1 *There is* therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus, who do not **walk** according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit.

The Bible provides spiritual instructions on what to do and what not to do. Once we are ready we can easily learn one simple way to improve in God's character. We can forgive and restore wrongs. We can serve each other with more compassion. We can improve with our humility. We can be more sincere. We can be more honest. We can direct our thoughts away from grudges and more toward forgiveness, mercy, and peace. We can think each day how to do these better. We can, if we are ready.

We can choose to stop distracting thoughts from abiding more in God. We can say no to hindering thoughts. We can imperfectly progress, little by little, toward perfection.

Stage Three - Do Them

Like a child learning to walk, ride a bike, or millions of other things a child learns, it starts with sloppy performance and mistakes. We can be confused and lost as we seek to progress with compassion, patience, truth, peace, etc. We can feel uncertain, lost, or frustrated. Such feelings are part of learning. Imagine a child who would give up trying to walk because of failure or frustration. Just as a child cries and hurts through learning, we too will hurt and suffer through the struggle of Godly improvement. We must shake off thoughts toward giving up or quitting.

When I improve it involves confusion, struggle, doubt, worry, fear, and frustration. I have experienced these things in quitting smoking, drinking, drugs, passive aggressiveness, growing truth, increasing sincerity, and many more things.

Romans 5:2 through whom also we have access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God. And not only *that*, but we also glory in tribulations, knowing that tribulation produces perseverance; and perseverance, character; and character, hope.

If I'm not struggling, I'm not growing. Tribulation can produce good character. Do I avoid struggle and tribulation? Do I view struggle as bad?

The instructions inform us to act upon them. James 1:22 But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves.

"Be doers of the word" he says. This is stage three. Over and over again the Bible provides instructions for our hearts and minds on how to think, feel, and behave. We need to convince ourselves to be formed with Godly good behavior and righteousness. We need to read and learn the instructions with a readiness to act upon them today.

We must continue to face ourselves, our inward condition, who we have become and where we are in our spiritual growth. Then we must keep our attention and diligence toward growing our inward livelihood in God's goodness.

Let's look at some Biblical instructions about being honest. Let's be ready to accept these instructions and live by them today.

Colossians 3:9 **Do not lie** to one another, since you have put off the old man with his deeds,

Job 17:5 He who speaks **flattery** to *his* friends, Even the eyes of his children will fail.

2 Thessalonians 2:3 Let no one **deceive** you by any means; . . .

Proverbs 30:8 Remove **falsehood** and lies far from me; . . .

Psalms 15:2 He who walks uprightly, And works righteousness, And **speaks** the **truth** in his heart;

Proverbs 8:7 For my mouth will **speak truth**; Wickedness *is* an abomination to my lips.

John 8:44 You are of *your* father the devil, and the desires of your father you want to do. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the **truth**, because there is no **truth** in him. When he **speaks** a lie, he **speaks** from his own *resources*, for he is a liar and the father of it.

Some of us might think, "How can I be honest," "How can I socialize without flattery," "What would people think if I spoke the truth," "what would become of my job?" Such questions will most likely develop. We will need to choose to be ready to live by God's instructions despite our fears or own ideas. Living with God is indeed a very different life. It is a better life. And just as a child learns to walk through falling, we too through perseverance can learn how to be more honest, sincere, and right with God's ways. We can do it.

Please listen to my podcast series “Experiencing God’s Character.” I did one on my experience with truth.

Stage Four - Practicing the Instructions

I was told to be rigorously honest. I remember at 21 years of age and newly sober another alcoholic was saying hello and asked how I was doing. I was struggling, confused, and angry. So what did I say? Well, I not only told him the truth, that I was angry, I honestly and sincerely said it in an angry tone. He said, thank you for being honest. He appreciated me being real.

I don’t believe perfection is the goal. But I do believe the level of our spiritual development will be contingent upon the level of our sincere honesty about ourselves. To improve our honesty and truthful thinking requires learning about discernment and a lot of self-evaluation. It requires sorting out the truth from the false. We will need to take captive our inward deceit and misleading information. Improved self-awareness through self-discovery must continue.

The more I practice truth using the methods described in the “Spiritual Growth Formula” the more I understand spiritual truth.

As we continue to practice truth like a child continuing to learn we can adjust how we express it. We can learn new vocabulary. We can redirect questions or rephrase them. We can choose when to answer and when not to. We can relearn how to be social with more of God’s righteousness.

God’s character traits of love, peace, compassion, mercy, forgiveness, truth, and justice are to be done collectively. Speak the truth without love can miss the mark. If I am angry, I will need to own my anger and do some spiritual work with my anger. The goal is love and peace. Practicing love with deceit is also missing the mark. God’s love is not deceitful. We are not to be fake with false presentations. We are to practice being real and learning how to live that way can require perseverance and tribulation.

It can take a lot of thought, practice, and time to grow our understanding in this new spiritual journey.

It took a lot from me to progress away from passive aggressiveness, defensiveness, anger, and dishonesty. I’m still be challenged by my corrupted memories and past learnings. I’m still tempted, but I can choose not to pursue such temptation. I can pray for help and set my thoughts toward understanding what God would like me to do.

As I mentioned previously, confusion is part of the struggle in learning. It involves a concentrated effort to grow our understanding. There is a continuous application of figuring things out.

Stage Five - Good Fruit

Once we are full grown and strong with God's spiritual good teachings we will be trained by them. We become demonstrators of God's sincerity, love, peace, and truth. Our training will help us teach and encourage others to help them experience grace through our good fruit.

1 Peter 4:10 As each one has received a gift, minister it to one another, as good **stewards** of the manifold grace of God.

At this stage we have grown and developed more in abiding with God. We have improved with love, peace, mercy, compassion, truth, justice, and forgiveness. We have learned patience, humility, and sincerity. We are ready to bring such an attitude with a clean conscience and pure heart to others. We imperfectly bring the grace we have received into our relationships where others can witness it.

We become teachers, ambassadors, stewards, and administrators of this spiritual good.

We have a choice of what we will pursue whether it is God's grace and to live by it or sin. We can choose to think about practicing peace or feeding anxiety. We can choose to harbor grudges or forgive. We can decide to be fake or be honest. We will exercise our choices every day. We can also choose not to think about it.

One central point in the Bible is growth. We are to be growing in God's righteousness and goodness.

Emphasize Growth

Growth means we improve into something more and more. We become better, bigger, or stronger in what we grow. We ought to evaluate ourselves like any good coach or leader to see just how well we are growing in our abiding with God. We each are the governor or conductor of our own inward development. No one else can make decisions for us. No one else can align our thoughts and beliefs with our hearts to be with God. No group, book, sermon, or structure can force our spiritual development. It is ultimately up to each of us individually. We first must accept this responsibility and the call to action before we can grow. We will each day need to be ready for God.

Spiritual Development Stages

Five Stages of Spiritual Development

With everything in development there are stages. This too with spiritual development. Over the past 30 years I have gone through experiences in my spiritual development that have been validated by others. I have listened to many people share about these stages in different ways. Growth stages are touched on in the book *Alcoholics Anonymous* and the Bible. These stages are very real, but only those who walk through them whole-heartedly can understand them.

Stage One - Being new

The first time in many situations can be full of fear, confusion, and excitement. It can be a thrilling experience. Some people can't wait to do it again, while others might never want to do it again.

Stage One for the Inward Authority process are those individuals who have yet to go through the equivalent of the 12 steps. Please see the Stage Two page on the website www.inwardauthority.com for this process. It is Biblical. It is how I understand the process of the Twelve Step programs. Anyone who has not lived by these principles and actions whole - heartedly can be stage one. This includes theology teachers, professors, and pastors. This is not to put down anyone, but to encourage everyone to do more of what Jesus taught us to do. To advance in spiritual awareness and understanding requires experience, spiritual experience.

I have found it impossible to help someone understand this spiritual way of life with words, pictures, or videos. Each person will need to do what Jesus teaches, at least the equivalence of the 12 steps. (see Stage Two)

This process requires serious courage, humility, self-discipline, perseverance, and endurance. It requires a lot of thinking, sensing, time, and diligence. The fact of the matter is, it is easier to listen, read, and watch than to live by these principles.

The process toward Stage Two involves anything that can help convince and inspire to do the action described in Stage Two. This often means a thorough self-assessment of personal character and how each one of us can improve with God's character. We will need to understand how we can abide more in God. Once we are ready, then we do it.

Here are some sayings I have heard many times over the years:

"If you keep going the way you are going you will keep getting what you are getting."

“Insanity is doing the same thing over and over expecting different results.”

“You can’t fix sick thinking with sick thinking.”

“Every time you point the finger you have three more pointing back at yourself.”

“There is a God and it’s not you.”

Stage Two

Here is a summary of the 12 steps minus the addiction aspect.

Step One: We admit that our way of living is insufficient, lacking, and that we need help outside of ourselves.

Step Two: We become willing to learn through action how living by God's principles can improve our inward being.

Step Three: We commit ourselves to God today. We commit to rely upon God's principles instead of our own. We commit to purify our hearts and cleanse our conscience from our wrongs and hurt.

Step Four - Five: We write down our resentments including any self-resentment. We write down whatever we have done that affects our heart or conscience. We humbly and sincerely share these with another person and God. We get real about what we have done with a willingness to begin living differently.

Steps Six - Seven: We learn more about character traits. We study character of God and evaluate our own character for improvement. We humbly and sincerely pray for strength to think and practice more with God's character and principles.

Steps Eight - Nine: We whole-heartedly seek to restore harm we have done to others throughout our lives. As servants for God, God's interests become ours. We right ourselves with others to right ourselves more with God. We forgive, have mercy, and restore wrongs.

Steps Ten - Twelve: We continue to practice all these steps each day. We focus upon how we can learn, grow, and improve with our spiritual character and attitude. We think about God's character each day and how we can experience it more with others. We pray, reflect, study, meditate, and listen to our spiritual senses each day. We help others with these steps as humble and sincere servants to God. We learn the lessons of love through all these steps.

In order to develop our spiritual senses we will need to sharpen our attention to feeling them. Since God is love we will need to focus upon all the attributes, attitudes,

thoughts, demeanor, words, and effects from how we learn to love. We will need to practice empathy, kindness, gentleness, and affection while learning the results from doing it. Because God is there. Being in alignment with such things is righteousness. We need to do all these things as best we can while seeing we are sincere and in truth. These are all Godly good things to do.

There will be parts of ourselves seeking to sabotage our walk in God's ways. Pride, fear, self-seeking, and self-deception will have their way with us from time to time. We can simply own it, pray for help, and be willing to do the next right thing. This growth is a process that is not over night. It is a life long developmental journey. It's best to take simple small progressive steps and keep walking that way.

Stage Three

Stage three involves a drifting or fading away from God reliance and growth in God's character. Many who go through the Twelve Steps over time can reduce their thoughts, diligence, and actions to keep growing with God's character through the practice of spiritual principles. Spiritual results come from spiritual activity just as results of muscle development come through exercise and strength training. We are as fit as much as we train to be. Our souls are a result of what principles we follow whether it's about self-seeking, people pleasing, or God alliance.

Just as it takes time to grow like it takes time for fruit to grow on a tree, it takes time to die or lose our spiritual strength. The time it takes to grow or fade will vary.

A good way to measure our spiritual fitness is to examine our thoughts and insights about our underlying interests, goals, desires, and motivations. Are we desiring to grow with God? Are we thinking about God's interests most of the day?

Distractions and new goals can sneak in to dominate our interests. A new career, job, hobby, or relationship can easily become our primary interest and reduce our focus upon God. This seems to be relatively normal. David and the disciples got distracted. What makes the difference is getting back on course. Once again we will need to reset our priorities to grow with God.

Just as Twelve Step groups were designed specifically to get people sober, this groups is designed specifically to get people back toward spiritual development and improvement. The substance is merely a symptom of our problem. Fading away from spiritual productivity has consequences.

At three years of sobriety I wanted to die. I was depressed with a negative view on just about everything. This negative view was a direct result with my falling away from spiritual action and commitment to do God's will. But I learned something of great value in this process. Just as I had to fail in controlled drinking to understand I needed help, I had to fail in running my sober life to realize I needed God. The fact of the matter

is that when I whole-heartedly devote myself to God, albeit imperfectly, I get good spiritual results. When I own responsibility for my choices and character development and improve it to align with God's will, my soul becomes filled. This has been proven to me over decades through action. I am only taught the truth when I walk in it and live the character out.

Stage Four

Stage four involves receiving God's instructions inwardly to think, act, and live more according to them. We commit our life and identity to live alongside God's character and principles.

In the parable of the sower Jesus describes how the word needs fertile ground. Fertile ground takes in the seed and nourishes it. The nourishing and care for the seed brings it to life and produces fruit. If we are to do likewise with God's instructions, then we will bring nourishment and care to abide in God's character and principles. We will live by them in a way where we bring them to life and produce good fruit.

Stage Four is being ready to make a whole-hearted sincere reset of our priorities to grow with God as we did before or even more. As stated in the book *Alcoholics Anonymous* on page 63 "We thought well before taking this step making sure we were ready; that we could at last abandon ourselves utterly to Him."

To bring nourishment to the word of God we need to be all in, with our heart, mind, soul, and strength. We need to continually live by it increasingly.

Imperfectly grow toward that which is perfect

The Bible discusses turning, repenting, and falling away. Some make it back after falling away and some do not.

If we go a day without nourishing the word in our heart, mind, and soul it will not die or fade any more than we would. It may struggle a bit. We must be careful not to go too long though without nourishing, growing, learning, listening, and living with God. Our soul needs God's goodness, character, righteousness, and grace. It feeds us. We need regular nourishment to maintain spiritual life.

Romans 11:22 - 23 Consider therefore the kindness and sternness of God: sternness to those who fell, but kindness to you, provided that you continue in his kindness. Otherwise, you also will be cut off. And if they do not persist in unbelief, they will be grafted in, for God is able to graft them in again.

Notice the clause here; "Provided that you continue in his kindness."

Since our growth with God will now be our top priority we will cling to God's will and character more and more. Our mental grip upon God's will and character will become tighter. Our actions will gradually become more aligned with it. Conversations about how we are walking according to God's character will happen naturally.

As our thoughts can sometimes wander from the path we will be able to redirect ourselves back. At Stage Four we will know through experience the destructive affects from being off the path too long.

Negligence to pursue God will mean falling back to Stage Three. (See page 85 A.A. book)

Stage Five

Having had a renewed spiritual experience through Stage Four we share our personal experience with others who are in Stage Three. We practice and teach our experience with these stages.

There are so many spiritually good reasons for carrying the message. Just keep reading the website tools, listening to podcasts, and living differently with God's instructions. Experience is our primary teacher. Below are some reasons to teach, encourage, and walk along side others in their development.

1. We are now administrators of the grace we have received. (2 Corinthians 9) As we bless others with kindness we situate ourselves to receive even more. (See the gold mine example in the book alcoholics anonymous)
2. The quality of our own souls depend upon how well we grow in God's righteousness. Teaching others with demonstration is the final stage of our development. We need to teach and demonstrate to grow further.
3. The people we help can help others who can in turn help even more.

That said, there are also very practical reasons why this is extremely important.

1. The Bible says to do it. (Do a concordance search on "Those who")
2. The Book Alcoholics Anonymous created a whole chapter on doing it.
3. Theories in Epistemology say teaching involves a deeper level of knowledge. (Webbs Depth of Knowledge, Bloom's Taxonomy)
4. Personal testimonies and practical experience affirm it is good and right.

Our own understanding

This process involves some investigation about God's ways and our own life. It's like an inward wrestling match with God's truth and goodness in one corner and our own

accustomed ways in another. We use our own experience and understanding to choose what to do.

Proverbs 3:5 Trust in the Lord with all your heart, And lean not on your **own understanding**;

Proverbs 23:4 Do not overwork to be rich; Because of your **own understanding**, cease!

Luke 9:23 Then He said to *them* all, "If anyone desires to come after Me, let him **deny himself**, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me.

The only way to move into stage two is to begin practicing the spiritual principles. We must be willing to step into the unknown and learn through new action.

Our own understanding will seldom help us get into new action. Unless of course our own understanding has taught us we desperately need to do something else. This is the case for many addicts. It called hitting a bottom.

An addict can hit a bottom when they become convinced their understanding and ways of doing things are destroying their lives. They decide they need help and become willing to do anything to be helped. They stop obeying their own ideas and follow Twelve Steps. They get a sponsor and follow new suggestions. These suggestions can be hard to follow if they think about them.

When we think about anything, we use our own understanding, experiences, and beliefs. Because our own understanding, experiences, and beliefs have proven to be inefficient to help us, we need to stop using it to decide certain actions.

When our thinking seeks to justify lies, anger, fear, self-seeking, vanity, greed, lust, etc., then we need to begin denying such thoughts. We need to do this progressively to shift our thinking more towards God's ways. We need to face certain facts about God's ways and compare those facts with facts about our ways. If we don't look to how we can improve then we probably won't.

Stage One is to begin to look at why God is good and slowly build reasons why we ought to consider growing in God's good through new action. We need Godly good messages around us that can help us convince ourselves about God's righteous ways.

Our defensiveness, blaming, and excuses need to stop.

Stage One is being on the fence.

All we know is what we have experienced. Our normal is based upon our own experiences. Our normal really isn't normal at all to the rest of the world. Our experiences exist in what we do and how we do it. It exist in our mental attitude and beliefs.

Each of us will adapt ourselves to way of life. As we mature we often settle into certain customs, rituals, and traditions. Being attached to such things can create a sense of safety, reliability, and predictability. Once we have adapted to a way of doing things, they grow on us, and we can rely upon them. This partially explains some of our struggles to change habits.

Inwardly our minds can develop reasoning why our unique way of doing things is good or beneficial. Then when we get challenged to change that developed belief system kicks in to defend that way of life. We may have been convincing ourselves for years how it is good. We may have even gone so far as convincing ourselves we are stuck and there is no other way. All of these are ideas that we can believe to be true. Belief is a very powerful inward authority. Belief will control what we do and how we do it.

When I began my spiritual journey I had to be willing to do many things that were contrary to my desires, preferences, and beliefs. It is challenging to listen to information that challenges my belief. But I had to know if there really was another way to live my life. I had to know.

I had to be willing to put on this yoke of spiritual development. I had to be willing to let go of anything that might try to steer me away from growing with God. I had to deny my beliefs and the beliefs of everyone I knew, even my family. I believe I understand some of what Jesus was saying in Matthew 10:34-39.

Ultimately, to really understand Jesus with increasing measure, I believe we will need to increasingly do more what Jesus taught us to do and understand the good in it. We need to become spiritual investigators to see the spiritual good in all of God's character through actual experience with it.

When I finally decided to give my all to God, to do God's will, then I began Stage Two. These stages are journeys within themselves. Beginning Stage Two is like deciding to open up the door to the path I am to travel, but I will need to walk it. The journey in Stage Two is laying the foundation for a new spiritual way of life. It involves cleansing our conscience of our wrongs and amending our defective character. It is full of submission to God, pouring out of our soul, and embracing a new spiritual way of life.

Time involved: Depends upon the person. Could happen early in life, later, or even never. Pride and self-seeking are dangerous traps.

Stage Two

Stage Two is where we put the books down for a bit and take action. Stage Two is full of ego deflation, God reliance, and letting go of self-seeking. This practice will need to be done for a while. Following God whole heartedly over time through this process can produce a spiritual awakening. Yet this is merely an awakening of our spiritual awareness. This infancy stage of awareness will need more continued development for it to reach maturity.

Stage Two also involves a steady practice of focus and attention toward spiritual reality. Our inward being, spirit, heart, mind, strength, and soul must not be ignored. We are to seek, study, and learn so much more about these inward behaviors and sensations. This means we dedicate time every day to improve our conscious awareness of what we think and how we feel. We rigorously invest ourselves to investigate how our words, attitude, demeanor, thoughts, and actions affect everyone.

Stage Two will involve much service work and building relationships. We will need to let others get to know us and get to know others. Sincerity, transparency, and being genuine will be part of this exploration. Frequent petitioning to God for guidance and strength will be needed. Daily meditation to train our thoughts toward inward feelings and thoughts become our norm.

Time involved: Often the first year or two, but varies. Sometimes people can go years practicing small bites of the process depriving themselves of the full experience. Again, the clinging to pride and self-seeking interfering with a complete abandonment to God. Those who will not give themselves completely over to this process may never really get a spiritual awakening. They may confess their wrongs, right their wrongs, and eliminate a few character defects, while never really give themselves over to do God's will and be changed by God's grace. The unwillingness to be clay for the potter can block the shaping of a person's soul.

Stage Three - Spiritual Neglect

Sin Management

At some point many of us will get our jobs back, our family back, and new friends. We may go to school and begin building a career. We might have a new romance. Our lives slowly become more manageable. We can set new goals and begin seeking God less. Our diligence toward spiritual development can get challenged. This seems to happen to most of us who get through Stage Two.

Since our lives have improved our desperation for God reliance diminishes. This decrease in desperation, which convinced us to get help, is no longer there. Many people can rely upon this feeling of desperation to seek God. They wait until things get

bad or problems occur. This is damage or sin management. It is still living under dysfunctional rules. This type of spiritual management is not in the instructions.

Instead of keeping ourselves clean, we can live our lives waiting until things get bad enough before cleaning up. We can go back and forth living for God and then returning to self-seeking and destructive ways. This type of spiritual living can form a perspective about God and spiritual practices that misses the mark.

I know this through experience and have shared about it through other podcasts.

Group Reliance

Whether it's a Twelve Step Group, small group, or a church, reliance upon such things will miss the mark. We are to each individually rely upon God. We are to seek out development with God each day through doing God's will. Anything else will fall short and miss the mark.

People in meetings, groups, and churches emphasize how important it is to come there and participate. Spiritual family can be developed anywhere at any time. It happens when people get fully honest and transparent with each other in humble sincerity. Although a guide through this process can be very helpful, it isn't necessary. What's necessary is humility, sincerity, willingness, diligence, and truth. We need to form our inward being to live with God.

When I began attending meetings I had a lot to learn about the Twelve Steps and spiritual development. The meetings were a huge help to learn from others and the book. But after a while, everything began to sound familiar. It became less likely that I would hear anything new. I learned about all I could learn through the meetings. Using a self-seeking mentality I would question why I should continue to go to the meetings. I mean, if I'm not learning anything new, why go?

This kind of thinking is the problem. Instead of using the meetings seeking to be gifted, we need to go to the meetings to begin gifting. Since we know it all, it's time for us to build up others who are newer.

Many of us have already heard this idea and perhaps have tried it. The problem will likely be that we are unmotivated to do it. We are unconvinced. We know there is good there, but when it comes to do it, our minds convince us to do something else. Once again, we run into a problem of manageability. This problem with managing our lives is mentioned every time we read or listen to the opening of the chapter, "How it works" from the book Alcoholics Anonymous. We rely too much upon our own ideas and interests and not enough with God's.

Lost Connection

I had an experience I have heard some others go through where I wondered if the spiritual experience I had was even real. When I lost my connection with God, over time, I began questioning God. This was a profound experience for me. Where I was once living each day praying and meditating with God seeking to do God's will, 6 months later, I'm on a fire escape at a dorm praying to God to give me a sign.

This losing connection experience is real. My mind and heart guided elsewhere can lose the ability to sense God's goodness. Just as Jesus describes in John 15, I need to remain attached to the vine. Good fruit will not develop from detachment.

Process

Stage Three is a process that can slowly wither away a person's soul, heart, and mind. Relapse, isolation, resentment, and serious depression can come through such spiritual neglect.

I know this through experience and listening to many other stories. Some say the beginning of relapse begins when we stop going to meetings. I believe it begins when we stop practicing Step Three. When slowly decrease our pursuit of God we gradually rely less and less upon God. We do less and less of God's will.

The spiritual damage that occurs from our neglect to rely more upon God and do God's will is tremendous. This is one reason I am dedicated to create materials, support groups, and teachings to continue growing with God. We need God more than groups, meetings, or churches. We can be with God without any of those things. It's an inward situation to be with God. We are to love God with all our heart, all our soul, and all our strength. We can do this command anywhere and anytime. We don't need anything except our own willingness and knowledge. In Stage Two we learned, so now we need the humility and faith to once again rely upon God more than ourselves.

We must make this choice each day.

Stage Four

Renewing the journey

At three years of sobriety faded out from spiritual practices and development. I became inwardly broken through following selfish ambition. I was full of resentment, withdrawn, and lonely. A man helped point me back to God. My pride had to break and my self-reliance had to fail to prove to me I still needed God's help. Just as I had to fail in practicing controlled drinking to learn how unmanageable my drinking was, I had to fail in my life living without God.

I renewed my journey and made God my top priority. My life improved quickly. My inward being felt whole again. I became confident again. Something new happened this time. My faith was strengthened. You see, learning how good it is to rely upon God is a good thing, but learning it again is even better.

When I first learned this spiritual way of life and good in it, I was amazed and shocked. Then when I re-experienced it I learned it was real, continuous, and dependent upon my cooperation with God. The first time I learned this through my experience in following the 12 steps. The second time I learned it by doing the same thing. The first time my motivation was out of need and curiosity. The second was out of desperation from inward death, emptiness, loneliness, and brokenness. God's easy fuel the spirit when practicing them.

Stage Five

Working with others who are in stage 3 to help them to stage 4. We share our experience strength and hope with each other how we were once complacent and have found our way back to spiritual freedom.

This process of working with others reminds ourselves of where we can be if we fade back into complacency through chasing after ungodly goals. We realize the good we can do for others who are suffering from spiritual complacency.

Distracted vs. undistracted mind

Motivation - eye of the tiger

The more goals we carry within our consciousness the less focus we place on any one of them.

Are we pursuing God with distractions? Are we seeking to grow with God while trying to be socially appropriate. You ever pray in a crowded restaurant wondering what other people might be thinking?

It's so easy to busy ourselves and make it look like we are productive and successful. Many people look like they are doing well, but yet dying inside.

I have an undistracted mind when my being gets focused toward something. I used to live this way for the weekend and partying. I can get really focused toward having a good time. I can also get this way in anger. When my pride is threatened I get become quite determined to compete. But most days I kinda just coast through life taking it easy.

I'm going to describe a day in theory what it would like if I completely dedicated my being toward God, to grow with God and do God's will as best as I possibly could. What could that look like in all my activities? I believe this is a very good thing to ponder.