

Steps to Spiritual Maturity: How We Grow up in Christ

What does it take to grow up and become spiritually mature? Why do some Christians not grow as they should? God's word presents steps we can take toward growth and spiritual maturity by Bible study, patience, and diligent practice of good works.

Introduction:

People understand the concept of growth in the physical development of humans, and we know why it is important.

Babies are immature physically and mentally, but we expect them to develop. If they don't, there is a problem.

My best buddy in high school did not grow and might have been nearly a midget. But in his senior year, doctors gave him shots to make him grow.

Spiritual growth is a similar concept but is far more important.

Growth is development or improvement toward a goal called "maturity" (or, in the Bible, "perfection"). When one is "born again" as a child of God, he is spiritually immature. As time passes, he should develop the qualities or abilities which the Bible says characterize the mature. A congregation matures as individual members mature.

Many Scriptures describe the need to grow and mature spiritually:

Ephesians 4:14,15 - Be no longer children, but grow up in Christ.

2 Peter 3:18 - but grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

2 Thessalonians 1:3 - The Thessalonians grew exceedingly in faith.

Philippians 1:9 - Paul prayed for their love to abound more and more.

Many problems result when members fail to grow: some go back to the world, others cause strife because of ignorance or become stumbling blocks because of irregular attendance, worldliness, or indifference.

The purpose of this lesson is to study the steps each Christian should take to grow spiritually.

Just as a baby needs to do certain things to grow physically, so Christians need certain kinds of activities to grow spiritually. When members don't grow, it is because they lack one or more of these.

I. A DESIRE TO GROW

A. We Will Never Grow Unless We Want to Grow

In the physical realm, children WANT to grow.

"I want to grow up to be just like Mommy/Daddy/Michael Jordan..." "I can't wait till I'm 16 so I can drive."

Parents and kids become so excited when kids learn something new - the first step, first word, draw pictures, etc. Everyone wants them to develop new abilities.

Parents sometimes use this to encourage children. When Tim was small, he wanted to drink milk because Bill Buckner (Cubs' first baseman) advertised it.

Likewise, in spiritual matters, Christians must WANT to grow.

1 Peter 2:2 - Desire the pure milk of the word, that you may grow thereby.

Some seem to like being spiritual babies. They don't want to grow. It's easy to be a baby - no responsibility. Others feed you, clothe you, change your

diaper. In the church, you don't have to teach, rebuke sin, or do work. It's a free ride!

But being a baby is not the goal of life. We are born babies so we can grow up and be productive and useful. Likewise, we are born again, so we can become mature Christians, actively serving the Lord.

One of the conditions for becoming a child of God is REPENTANCE. One must determine to turn from sin and GO TO WORK in God's vineyard. Then one must bring forth the FRUITS of repentance. This will lead us to grow and improve in God's work. Otherwise, we have not accomplished our purpose for becoming children of God.

1 Peter 2:21 - Jesus set an example for us, and we should follow in His steps. We should ask ourselves, "Don't I want to grow up to be spiritually strong like Jesus?"

B. We Must Maintain This Desire to Grow.

Some members who once wanted to grow may lose that desire.

They may start on fire for the Lord but lose their zeal. They develop a spirit of indifference or negligence.

Others develop a level of maturity and stagnate. They are satisfied, thinking no more growth is needed.

The Scriptures teach that growth is always needed.

Philippians 3:12-14 - Even Paul, as mature as he was, did not consider himself to have achieved perfection (maturity) such that he could cease striving to improve. He forgot past achievements (and failures) and pressed on to greater accomplishments.

Matthew 26:31-35 - Peter thought he had reached a level where he would never deny Jesus. But that very night he denied Him three times.

1 Corinthians 10:12 - Therefore let him who thinks he stands to take heed lest he falls. Christians never reach the point we are so mature that we cannot fall.

One of the main reasons Christians do not grow is that they do not see the NEED for growing. They have no desire to work and serve to the full extent of their ability. When people develop a burning hunger and thirst to work for the Lord, then they will develop the other steps they need to grow.

Do you have that burning desire to accomplish more for the Lord? Have you set specific goals of work you want to accomplish for God, improvements to make, new levels to reach?

II. NOURISHMENT

A. We Need Spiritual Food from God's Word.

A child cannot grow physically without proper food.

Good parents are concerned about proper nutrition. They want children to eat what is good, not bad for them. We are touched by pictures of children starving due to poverty.

Most children WANT nourishment. Babies cry for food. Once as a child I got so hungry I cried, and my mother felt bad.

Even adults know we need food and don't like to go long without it. We want it every day, regularly, several times a day.

Likewise spiritually we cannot grow without feeding on God's Word.

1 Peter 2:2 - As newborn babes, desire the pure milk of the word, that you may grow thereby.

2 Peter 3:18 - Grow in the grace and KNOWLEDGE of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Matthew 4:4 - Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.

[Eph. 4:15; Matt. 5:6]

B. To Get This Nourishment, We Must Study the Bible and Attend Church Meetings.

Scriptures show the need for regular nourishment.

Hebrews 5:11-14 - Christians were rebuked for not growing as they should have because they had not studied. Time and again members fall away or are spiritual midgets because they do not eat properly.

Acts 17:11 - Bereans were able to determine whether truth was taught because they searched the Scriptures DAILY. We need REGULAR nourishment.

Psalms 1:1,2 - Meditate on God's word day and night. Children and adults need physical food regularly and get very upset without it. But are we content to go for days at a time without feeding on God's word?

[119:47,48,95-99; Josh 1:8]

Do we make use of the opportunities the church provides for nourishment? I never ceased to be amazed when the church provides a spiritual feast, and members choose to do other things. How often do we miss the regular meals provided for our bellies?

Take this test to check your spiritual nourishment.

How much time did you spend this week watching TV?

How much time watching sports or entertainment, or reading the paper, magazines, etc.?

How much time did you spend on some hobby or outside interest, that may not be immoral but is not necessary?

How many hours did you spend studying your Bible?

How many services of the church did you attend? How many did you miss that you could have attended?

Which do you nourish the best: your spirit or your body? Are you feeding your mind on God's word or pleasures?

Christians need regular nourishment from God's word to grow.

III. EXERCISE AND PRACTICE

A. Exercise and Practice Are Essential to Physical Development.

Athletes & musicians know they must exercise and practice to improve.

Developing skills requires continual repetition: playing a song, throwing pitches, shooting baskets.

Athletes run, lift weights, and practice hour after hour to grow strong and develop endurance.

Illustration: A man once had an apartment next to a professional cello player. He thought it must be exciting to play in an orchestra. Then he listened as the man practiced the scales, exercises, and songs endlessly.

Children practice skills over and over to learn them.

Children learning to walk try again and again. They are proud to learn a new word, then they use it till they drive you crazy! They want to play the same thing over and over: play the same tape recording, but the clothes on

a doll.

Parents encourage children to repeat what they must learn: drill math facts, spelling, reading, piano. They get tired, but we encourage them because that's how they learn.

"Practice makes perfect" - or at least it promotes improvement.

B. Exercise and Practice Are Essential to Spiritual Growth.

Scriptures:

Hebrews 5:14 - Those who are of full age, because of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil. Growth requires exercise as well as nourishment.

1 Timothy 4:7 - Exercise yourself toward godliness.

Like children, athletes, and musicians, we must work again and again at applying Bible principles to become effective in the Lord's work.

Applications:

To learn to TEACH, we must do it repeatedly: teach your children, home studies, Bible classes, preach sermons, again and again.

To learn to LEAD SINGING, practice songs at home, sing with your family, lead during church meetings over and over.

To understand the BIBLE, study it again and again, talk to others, drill yourself, memorize. Get in and dig.

To learn to PRAY, do it over and over.

Kids may not be good at activities at first, but parents encourage them to do it over and over. Likewise, older members must encourage the newer ones to use their talents. They may not be skilled at first, but they learn by doing.

We need to encourage teachers, preachers, and song leaders. Don't complain. Surely don't stay home. They need the practice!

IV. TIME AND PATIENCE

By definition, growth requires TIME. It is progress and development as time passes. Several important lessons follow:

A. Don't Expect to Reach Your Goal Overnight.

Children do not become full-grown instantaneously.

At birth they are so small you can hold them in a little basket. Soon they are outgrowing new clothes every month. Eventually, they can wear their parents' clothes or even larger ones. But it takes time.

Sometimes children become impatient. "I can't wait till I'm 18 (or 21)." We say, "Take your time. It will come soon enough." Time passes and, sure enough, what they were waiting for has come and gone, and they're looking back wondering how the time passed so fast!

Likewise spiritually, do not expect maturity overnight.

James 1:4 - To become perfect and mature (entire), lacking nothing, we must have patience.

Some newborn Christians want to know everything and do everything right away. They may not be willing to take the TIME to STUDY and DEVELOP abilities. Yet they want to be just like the mature members - and want other members to treat them with the same respect that they do mature members - before they have taken time to grow.

Sometimes older members are impatient with new members. We don't understand why new converts have trouble with some basic concepts. Then

sometimes these new members explain, "I never was taught what the BIBLE said before." They have no background in the Scriptures, and it takes TIME to grow.

Remember that people who may be mature today did not get that way overnight. It took years of study and practice. And new converts will not become mature overnight. It will take time.

New members should not get discouraged and give up. Older members should not be impatient or overly demanding. Remember how our children took time to grow, and how we had to show patience with their immature ways as they grew. But growth will come as long as people are trying and we give them time.

B. Don't Become Discouraged by Mistakes and Rebukes.

Children make many mistakes and must often be told they are wrong.

How often does a child fall while learning to walk? They fall, again and again, gathering bumps and bruises. They spill their milk, don't hold their spoon properly, fall off their bikes, and come to bat in the bottom of the ninth with the winning run in scoring position and strikeout.

Parents are continually correcting, instructing, and punishing, till we almost feel sorry for the kids. Growing up is tough!

If kids are going to become mature, they have to keep going despite mistakes and rebukes. And someday they will look back on their own childish mistakes and just smile.

Likewise, new converts will make many mistakes and must often be told they are wrong.

Some of the greatest Bible characters committed terrible errors and had to be rebuked.

** Moses made excuses when God called him to lead Israel out of bondage.*

** David committed adultery with Bathsheeba and was rebuked by Nathan.*

** Peter denied Jesus three times.*

** Paul persecuted Christians before his conversion.*

** Thomas doubted Jesus' resurrection.*

** All the apostles forsook Jesus when He was arrested and crucified.*

Matthew 16:21-23 - Shortly after he had confessed to Jesus and been highly praised (v15-18), Peter contradicted Jesus and was severely rebuked.

Yet all of these are remembered as some of God's greatest servants.

Great servants are not people who live without ever sinning, but people who learn from their mistakes and go on to serve God faithfully.

Judas betrayed Jesus and is remembered as a traitor. Peter denied Jesus three times and is remembered as a great apostle. What is the difference?

Judas, after betraying Jesus, hung himself. Peter, after denying Jesus, repented and went to work preaching the gospel.

Proverbs 29:1 - A person is destroyed, not simply because he errs, but because he becomes stubborn when he is rebuked and will not repent.

What is needed is repentance and patience to learn to do right.

Conclusion

The story is told of a little boy who fell out of bed. Asked what happened, he said, "I guess I just stayed too close to the gettin'-in place." That is exactly why many people fall away from God after their conversion - they stay too close to the "gettin'-in" place and do not grow to maturity.

It is no shame to be a baby if you were born a few months ago. But if a person has been a child of God for several years and has not grown, he has a problem.

Everyone needs to grow as a Christian, and everyone can grow if he/she

simply applies the Bible principles of growth.