

## Growing In Grace

Part 9 of Good News About Grace

2<sup>nd</sup> Peter 3:18

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This morning I would like us to look at what it means to grow in God's grace. What is growing in grace all about? First, I must tell you that it isn't about how many. It's not how many meetings you attend at church. It's not how many verses you memorize in the Bible. It's not how many minutes you spend in prayer each day or in reading the Bible. It's not about how many Christian books you read last year. It's not even about how many people you have led to Christ. It's not a matter of how many. How many times you go to church, how many times you go to Sunday school class or Bible study group. These may all be growth producing activities but if you do them it doesn't automatically cause you to grow in grace.

Think of it this way. If you want to get in shape physically and you go to a fitness center like the YMCA and you walked into the exercise room with your lawn chair and plopped the lawn chair down in the middle of the room and then plopped yourself down in the lawn chair and if you watch everyone exercise for an hour each day for a whole year, you wouldn't be any closer to getting in shape than before you did all that. It's not about how many hours you spend at the gym, it's about how much you exercise.

Growing in grace is not about how many but how much. It's about how much closer to the Lord you are getting. It's about how much love you have in your heart for the Lord and how much you allow that love for the Lord to influence all the other relationships in your life. It's about how much your love for the Lord is actually shaping your character, and the way you treat others. There is no doubt about it; God's desire is for us to grow in his grace. In 2<sup>nd</sup> Peter 3:18 we are told to ***"grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ."*** Just being a Christian is no guarantee that we will grow in God's grace. Just being in the exercise room is no guarantee that you will grow more physically fit.

Today we're going to look at how we grow in God's grace. There's a process for growth that God has designed for our lives that can drastically increase the rate of change within us. When we cooperate with that process we can see ourselves really grow. But I'll be honest. I've known a lot of people who have been Christian for years and years and yet they haven't grown much. And then again, I've known people who have been Christian only a short time but they've grown in leaps and bounds. How do we grow in God's grace? What is the process God has established? In Ephesians 4:22-24 we find a three part process. ***"You were taught with regard to your former way of life to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires, to be made new in the attitude of your minds and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness."*** Let's look at each part of this process together.

**FIRST, WE ARE TOLD TO "PUT OFF YOUR OLD SELF."** The old is what used to be. The old is what my life was like without Christ. The old is everything that had to do with my life before I came to faith in Jesus Christ. I tried to grow on my own but I couldn't get anywhere.

**First, I tried to grow by doing good things.** I thought if I could just do enough good things then I'd grow and mature and be a better person. The problem was I was still the same old person even though I was doing new things. Jesus told his disciples that it won't work to try to live a new way when you're the same old person inside. To get this point across, he told them this story. He said, "*...men do not pour new wine into old wineskins. If they do, the skins will burst, the wine will run out and the wineskins will be ruined. No, they pour new wine into new wineskins, and both are preserved.*" -Matthew 9:17. Does anyone here have a wineskin hanging around your house? I didn't think so, so let me say a few words about what Jesus was talking about. In Jesus' day people would pour new wine into an animal skin and as the wine fermented it would expand and the skin would expand with it. But if they put new wine into an old skin that had already been stretched, it would burst and the wine would be lost and the skin ruined. Jesus was telling the disciples that a new way of life demands a new person, a person that has been made anew, a person who has been made new by the Spirit of God. Jesus told Nicodemus it was all about being "born again", (John 3) born from above, made new by the power of God in us. It won't work to try to grow by doing good if we're the same old person inside. We must first be made new so the good behavior will be able to help us grow. It's not just about doing good things. We have to be made new from above so the new things we do can be supported by a new you, made new from above when we first come to Christ.

**The second way I tried to grow was by obeying rules.** Hebrews 13:9 says, "Your hearts should be strengthened by God's grace, not by obeying rules." We don't grow in grace simply by obeying certain rules. Rules can't produce growth. Obeying rules doesn't necessarily produce maturity. When my children were young I had a lot of rules for them because they needed those rules to keep them safe. As they grew older I gave them more freedom. I wasn't still picking out their clothes when they were thirteen. They needed to learn to make their own decisions as they grew older. So I would give them more responsibility to make decisions as I saw they could handle it. The more freedom I gave them, the more responsible they became. The fewer rules I imposed on them the more they grew. Rules cannot produce growth.

The Bible is very clear that we are incapable of saving ourselves. The Bible says we were dead in our sins and trespasses. Dead people can't save themselves. It's like we were in a little row boat out on the ocean and we were trying to row ourselves to shore. We were never going to make it. So God sent a huge ocean liner to come along side us and lift us out of our lostness. So there we are, standing on the deck of the ocean liner, and we see our little boat down below on the surface of the water, and we haul the rowboat up to the deck where we are standing.

Then we get into the rowboat as it rests on the deck of the ocean liner, and we begin to row thinking, "Won't the captain be impressed with me. Look what I'm doing."

God has a new way for you to get where he wants you to go. It's called the way of grace. He's going to produce the growth in you that he wants you to experience and it won't be because you are obeying any rules. It will be because you have surrendered your will to God's and you are allowing Him to get you where he wants you to be.

**Third, I tried to grow by feeling bad about the bad things I did.** I thought that would help me to grow and become a better person. I thought that by feeling bad about the bad things I did, I'd make others see I was growing. I'd make God see he didn't need to condemn me because I was already feeling bad. He didn't need to make me miserable because I was already feeling miserable. But that's not what God wants for us. Romans 8:34 says, "*Who then will condemn us? Will Christ? No. For He is the one who died for us and came back to life again for us.*" Feeling bad about ourselves is not the way to grow in the Lord. We must put off the old ways of trying to grow. Those ways don't work. We must put off the old self and all the old ways of trying to grow.

**THE SECOND PART OF GOD'S PROCESS FOR GROWING IN GRACE IS TO PUT ON THE NEW SELF.** Where do we get this new self? 2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians 5:17 says, "*If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation, the old has gone, the new has come.*" Being in Christ, resting in what He has done for us on the cross for our salvation, believing in what He has done for us to save us from our sins, makes us new people. That's a promise for all who believe in Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior. That's a promise for all who say, "Lord, I want to be found in You! I want to belong to You. I want to surrender my life to You." The promise of the Christian life is the old has gone, the new has come.

Here are a couple of things you should know about this new life. **First, it's not something we have to achieve.** It's not something we have to make happen. New life in Christ is not something we bring about. When we think this thing called the Christian life is something we do ourselves, that's when we get messed up. New life in Christ is not something we create. It's there for us to put on, but it's not something we design and make. It's already been designed and made for us. We step into it as an act of faith. We receive it as an act of faith. We put it on and enjoy it, like an expensive suit or a elegant new dress. God offers us this new self. He says, here it is. Enjoy what I have created for you. We can't believe it. We keep trying to achieve it on our own.

**Second, the new life is not something we hold on to.** The Bible says, "*Your old sinful self has died and your new life is kept in Christ in God.*"-Colossians 3:3. That's pretty safe. That's pretty secure. Your new life in Christ is not something you can misplace or have stolen from you. When it comes to your security as a believer, your salvation, your new life in Christ,

it is all kept for you in Christ Jesus. He's got you in the palm of his hand and he's not going to let you go. He's never going to give up on you.

While this new life is not something we achieve or something we keep safe, it is something we put on. Our participation is necessary. There is a decision that we make about this new life in Christ. We can admire the new life in Christ from a distance, like looking at a beautiful gown hanging in the closet, or we can take hold of the new life and put it on. We have a choice. When God starts to work on us with his saving grace, we find ourselves saying "Yes, Lord, I want to be yours. Please come into my heart and make me what you want me to be." Then we have to begin to put on the new life. As we do, the old life we were wearing starts to look pretty shabby in light of the new life Christ offers us. Sometimes we even go back to the old way of life but it doesn't feel right anymore. It doesn't fit anymore. God has caused you to grow in Christ and now the old life is more and more uncomfortable.

That's the way it's supposed to happen. When God works in our hearts, we begin to recognize the difference between the old self and the new self and the new self looks a whole lot better. But during this process of moving away from the old and into the new, we can have some setbacks. We can have some relapses. Like a dog that returns to its vomit, we can set our new life aside and return to the old life. Eventually that old life is seen for what it is, and we stop deceiving ourselves in to thinking it has anything of value to offer us and we get serious about putting on the new life that Christ offers us. But I'll warn you, it's a daily struggle to put off the old and put on the new.

It's amazing how much we Americans spend on looking good. We are so caught up in looking good on the outside, but God is more concerned about how we look on the inside. He wants us to look like Jesus Christ on the inside. He wants us to spend more time on looking good on the inside than on the outside. He's more concerned with our character and how we deal with relationships.

Growing in grace begins by putting off the old and putting on the new life Jesus offers us.

**THE THIRD PHASE IN GOD'S PROCESS FOR GROWING IN GRACE IS THE RENEWING OF OUR MINDS.** The Bible tells us, "*Don't copy the behavior and customs of this world, but let God transform you into a new person by changing the way that you think.*"—Romans 12:2. Changing the way we think is where the power is. God wants to change the way we think. He wants us to see things the way He sees them. That's what it means to have our minds renewed. If we could see our sins the way God sees them, it would change us. We would see how our sins hurt us and how our sins hurt other people. If we could only see things the way God sees them, it would enable us to change more quickly. It would motivate us to change more quickly.

God is the one who changes the way we think when we humble ourselves before Him. He's the one who does the good work in us. In Galatians 3:3 it says, "***You began your life in Christ by the Spirit. Now are you trying to make it complete by your own power? That is foolish!***" It's all about God's grace from beginning to end. A renewed mind isn't just a matter of determination. It's a matter of dependence on God. The power is in His grace. You live the Christian life the same way your began it - by grace.

Living the Christian life is an exercise in dependence. If I took a 747 to Charlotte and on the way I decided I could handle it on my own, and I stepped out of the plane, thinking I could make it the rest of the way on my own, well, it's not going to work. I would drop like a rock! The Bible calls this "falling from grace." It doesn't mean you've lost your salvation. It means you've started to depend on yourself for growth; you've started to take things into your own hands. As soon as you do that you start to free fall until you say, "God help me. I can't do this on my own." This thing called the Christian life can only be successful when we depend on God for the growth—when we depend on God to change us from the inside out as we depend on Him to renew us. Growth is accomplished by trusting God to change us. In Philippians 1:6 it says, "***He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.***" That's a promise God makes to us. Not only that, we are told that "***God is at work within us, helping us to want to obey Him and helping us to do what he wants us to do.***"—Philippians 2:13.