

A Growing Need

II Peter 3:18

Well, I have to say that three months into 8th grade has come with its set of new challenges. You have all noticed by now that David is growing up. It's been a whirlwind, rollercoaster kind of ride for almost 14 years. Beginning in Kindergarten through 7th grade we have had an active role in helping him with his homework. Jr. High has seen some changes. Each class posts information on the internet so that we can monitor on a weekly basis his progress and assignments. We can look at the upcoming week and see what homework, projects, quizzes and tests are scheduled. Even his grades are updated weekly. We can make sure he brings home the right books so we can study with him. Up until this year we would review spelling and grammar, work on memory verse recitation, quiz him on history, science and geography and check his math. It was, at least for me and probably for David when I would help him, a painstaking and time consuming effort. I remember in kindergarten wondering if he would ever learn to read and now that's about all he does.

I will honestly admit that there were times I would be extremely frustrated trying to review subjects and there were times he would be near tears because out of that frustration I kept pushing. I will confess and David will wholeheartedly agree that there were times I pushed him harder than was perhaps necessary. Sometimes in the middle of those study sessions I would think to myself that I have other things to do and my pushing only made it go longer and harder. On more than a few occasions I would remind him that I have already been to school, gotten my diplomas and degree and don't need to go to school again. In the words of George Bailey in It's a Wonderful Life "I was a warped, frustrated old man." I will confess that I'm sorry for it. Robyn has been a much better and more patient tutor. So I gladly relinquished most of the study time to her agreeing to do the dishes instead.

But 8th grade has had different challenges that have been met with some changes. Now David has always been a good student and gotten excellent grades. Because of that we wanted to let him spread his proverbial wings a bit. So we had a chat with him. We wanted to give him some freedom in his studies, so we proposed a deal. As long as he could maintain good grades without our assistance we would not pester him about bringing home books or making sure assignments were done. It was time for him to bear more responsibility in keeping his grades up with limited intervention or assistance on our part. However, if any subject began to drop, knowing that he is capable of getting good grades, he would be required to bring that book home to study with us until that grade improved. When it did, we would slack off the requirement of bringing that book home. It's not a completely hands off approach, but we are giving him a lot of flexibility for his studies and grades.

This past week as I was preparing for the message I was also finishing a book by Tony Evans titled *Kingdom Man*. As I was reading and reflecting on the closing chapters I came to the stark realization that my approach to helping David with homework needed to change a while ago. I need to shift my thinking. David will always need guidance, not just in his school work but in life. That guidance changes year by year, but I always need to have a hand in leading. Everything about how I approach teaching him should be for the purpose of helping him spread his wings all the while remembering that he still needs mentoring. That will never stop. It's a part of helping him grow and mature. I still look to my Dad and I hope when David is an adult he will look to me.

I brought in this Christmas cactus today. It was a gift from someone about four years ago. It started out in a small pot and the first year at Christmas had a few blooms. It remained in that pot for several years. It grew but not a lot. If the soil looked dry we would add water. Occasionally I would tell

Robyn we should report that, but we never did even after she bought a bigger pot. The new pot just sat in the garage. This past spring our plant started to wilt a bit. The leaves started to turn a little yellow. They became thin and wrinkly. It wasn't that we had forgotten to water it. The problem was that it was root bound. It couldn't grow anymore because there wasn't any room in the little pot. It also needed some new soil. So Robyn got out her bigger pot added some new soil and put it in an environment where the plant could grow. I put it out in the greenhouse on the back of the garage to get more exposure to direct sun and heat. In just a couple of days there was an amazing and noticeable difference. Out there in its new pot with fresh soil exposed to lots of sun and warmth the leaves began to perk up and get thick, the color turned to a rich green. We even had some out of season blooms. Since it was repotted the plant has doubled to the point where pretty soon it will need to be repotted again. Given the right environment the plant could grow.

Just like the plant, we understand that for David to grow, he also needs the right environment.

Both need the right soil and temperature.

The right soil for David is to plant him in an environment where he can grow deep roots of faith so that when the winds of adversity or temptation come along he will stand strong. He needs to be planted in the soil of God's Word (Psalm 1:1-3).

Both need the right exposure to the sun. Our plant needs the light of the sun for growth. David needs exposure to the light of God's Son to be healthy.

Constant exposure to Christ will help the color of his character be vibrant and stand out.

Both need encouragement. Some botanists say that plants respond well when you talk to them. People sing or carry on conversations as they would with a friend. Truth be known, it's not in what you say to your plant, it's in what you give when you speak. When you exhale through talking you give off carbon dioxide which is as necessary to a plant for

growth as is oxygen to us. So talk away, your bad breath is helping them grow. If talking is healthy for plants, talking words of encouragement is healthy for David. He needs the right kind of encouragement to help him grow. His mother is masterful at it. His father needs to work on that a bit with him.

Both need fertilizer from time to time. The right amount of added nutrients is necessary for proper growth. David needs the right nutrients through family time in devotions and in time with other believers, taking to heart the principles of Deuteronomy 6 to make every opportunity a teaching moment for spiritual growth. Just because he is man sized in body he still needs mentoring and he always will. When he becomes an adult he will still need guidance. No matter how old we are or how long we have been a Christian we must never get to a point where we think we don't need mentoring. That's something I learned from reading *Kingdom Man*. We always need to be investing in the life of someone and we always need to have someone investing in us. Never get to a point in your Christian life that you don't need a mentor or teacher. And men, it really begins with your own walk with the Lord. You can't lead someone where you either have not been or are unwilling to go. So men, man up and lead your family spiritually. It takes time and effort.

Ladies if you are at the stage in your life where you are on your own, find another godly woman with whom you can be mentored.

An underlying message in this letter from Peter is that we can't do this thing called the Christian life without help. From the wisdom of Solomon in Ecclesiastes we read that a threefold chord is not easily broken (Eccl. 4:12). We need each other. He also stated in Proverbs 27:17 "As iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another."

A number of months ago I realized I needed to be sharpened and so I asked someone to meet with me

and about once a week we get together to pray. I need to be mentored and encouraged so that I can grow in my faith in order to lead others in their faith.

And that is the challenge that Peter leaves us with in his closing remarks in II Peter 3:18. His letter has been a challenge to believers to stand strong together in their faith. He is someone who clearly understands how fragile faith can be. Just when we think our faith is strong something happens to burst our bubble to show us it wasn't as strong as we thought.

The fragility of his faith was seen when he walked out on the water but began to sink when he saw the raging storm around him.

The fragility of his faith was seen when he lopped off the ear of Malchus in the garden when Jesus was arrested.

The fragility of his faith was seen when he denied Christ those three times during the night hours of Jesus's trial.

The fragility of his faith was seen after the crucifixion when he decided to go back to fishing.

But after the coming of the Holy Spirit he was a changed man, a man of tremendous faith, a man of unwavering faith.

As a man of faith he boldly preached on the Day of Pentecost and three thousand were saved after they heard the gospel.

As a man of faith he fearlessly stood up to the intimidation of the religious leaders who threatened him if he continued to preach the resurrected Christ. As a man of faith he led a ragtag group of eleven other men to turn the world upside down for Christ.

II Peter 3:8 is his last recorded words. They have traveled through the centuries to encourage and exhort believers of all ages in all corners of the world to stand strong in their faith with words of how to do just that. Soon the ominous knock of Nero's soldiers will echo through the chambers of his home. They will come to arrest him on trumped up charges of disturbing the peace or crimes against

Caesar teaching people to follow another king.

He will not resist.

He will not pick up a sword in defense.

He will not run and hide in some feeble attempt to escape. What happens next to him will fulfill the prophetic words of Jesus indicating how he would die. It would be by crucifixion. Before the crucifixion he had boldly proclaimed that he was willing to die with Jesus and then failed by denying Him at the trial. Now Peter is willing to die for Jesus and his closing words either challenge us or incriminate us.

His words challenge us to consider what we are doing each day to stand firm in our faith in an effort to stand against those who would persecute us or spread false teaching.

His words incriminate us if we are not doing all we can or should to be prepared for spiritual battle.

In verse 17 Peter exhorted believers to be on guard so that we won't be carried away by false teachers. If we are not steadfast in our faith then we will become easy targets for their false teaching. In verse 18 Peter gives us the answer on how to stand. "But grow in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ."

There are two injunctions, two exhortations that will help us stand guard. Both require growth. Both require effort on our part. The word "grow" is present active imperative meaning that it is a command that we are to do today and every day. Literally it means to keep on growing or in vernacular today – keep it up. Don't stop. In his first letter, Peter stated that we should desire the sincere milk of the Word so that we can grow by it (I Peter 2:2).

The first imperative is to "keep on growing in the grace of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ."

So just exactly what does it mean to grow in grace? Think of it this way: It's a growth manifested in living for Jesus.

I. IT'S A GROWTH MANIFESTED IN LIVING FOR JESUS

Grace simply means unmerited favor. It's something given that isn't deserved. Grace is not given based on any merit of the recipient. Grace is freely bestowed. In his book *Transforming Grace*, Jerry Bridges writes "Grace is God's free and unmerited favor shown to guilty sinners who deserve only judgment. It is the love of God shown to the unlovely. It is God reaching downward to people who are in rebellion against Him... Grace and works are mutually exclusive. Our relationship with God is based on either works or grace."

Romans 11:6 (Phillips paraphrase) "And if it is a matter of the grace of God, it cannot be a question of their actions especially deserving God's favor, for that would make grace meaningless."

In other words if works is what was required for salvation then God's grace would prove to be without value, but Ephesians 2:8-9 is abundantly clear that we are saved by grace alone through faith in Christ so that we have nothing with which we can boast. We stand saved solely on the grace bestowed us by God freely having no merit in ourselves with which to barter with God for salvation.

John Newton so eloquently pictured this for us in the lyrics of his song Amazing Grace when he penned "Tis grace hath brought me safe thus far, and grace will lead me home." Grace started me on the journey and grace will help me complete it the journey.

Philippians 1:6 insinuates the work of God's grace in the believer when Paul writes (and I'll add grace for emphasis), "He [God] who began a good work in you [by His grace] will [also by His grace] carry it on to completion until the day of Jesus Christ."

If there is one thing that needs to be abundantly clear it is this: grace is totally from God. I Peter 5:10 says that He is the "God of all grace." Grace is found nowhere else but in God alone.

In II Corinthians 12:10 Paul, speaking from experience, concludes that God's grace is sufficient for every situation we encounter in life. Paul went on to say that when he recognized his own weakness it was an opportunity for the power of God to be displayed. God's grace gives us what we need to endure trials and hardship of every kind.

In addition to His saving grace and His sufficient grace, the grace of God is a sanctifying grace. His grace helps us grow in Christ. Through the empowering, indwelling Holy Spirit, He guides our spiritual growth as we give up more and more of our will in desire to follow God's will, submitting in obedience to His Word. He then produces spiritual fruit in us that reflects the character of God in everyday life.

So we can say that on one hand because grace comes from God alone, His grace is the means of growth. We cannot grow in grace without first having a personal relationship with Him through the grace He has given us through faith in Christ.

A. Grace From God Is The Means Of Growth

Now when the Spirit of God works in us developing the character of God, the evidence is seen in things like love, joy, peace, patience, gentleness, kindness, faith, meekness, and self-control (Galatians 5:22-23). We cannot grow in grace until and unless it is God's Spirit doing the work. I cannot make this cactus produce flowers. It is completely a work of its nature within. Because we are a new nature in Christ with His Spirit living in us, He is able to produce the fruit of God's grace in us. Apart from Him it is a fruitless effort. He does the growing we do the yielding. To put it in the negative, if we resist His work we won't grow.

Part of that yielding is putting ourselves in the right conditions where He can maximize our growth. It takes being in His Word regularly, praying, meeting together regularly with other believers to study and fellowship, confessing sin and so on. If I

choose to remove myself from those conditions, I limit His ability to produce the fruit of grace in me. Grace from God is the means of growth.

So when His work is being produced in me the evidence of it will be in how I demonstrate it to others. Grace to others is the measure of growth.

B. Grace To Others Is The Measure Of Growth

A good barometer on how well I'm letting the Spirit develop God's character of grace in me is to see how I treat others. That's the measuring stick.

Simply put to grow in grace means to mature as a Christian. The sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit in helping us become more like Christ is the same as growing in grace. So essentially, Peter is saying that if you want to stand strong against false teachers or against a world that is in opposition to what you stand for, continue to mature in your faith. Growing in grace isn't about what we do, it's about what we let God do in us and through us. God's grace frees us from bondage to sin and helps us follow him.

Let's remember that as a believer, the moment we were saved we had all of God's grace. We will never receive any more and we can never have any less than we do right now. Are you letting yourself experience all of God's grace to unleash the Holy Spirit to do a great work of maturing you that will be evident in how you respond to others?

The degree to which we understand God's grace at work in us is the degree to which we will demonstrate its influence on us to others.

Let's also keep in mind that Peter's injunction here is to increase or grow in the grace of the Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. The more we learn about Him and what He has done for us to secure our salvation, the more we will appreciate all that He has done for us. The more we understand His sacrifice for us, the more we will understand the grace of God and the life transforming impact it has on us. The more it

impacts us, the more we will exhibit it to others.

Bruce Barton writes that "believers 'grow in grace' as they understand that they are living by God's grace alone – so everything they do is a result of that grace."

The more we understand what Christ has done for us, the greater will be our desire to live for Him. That is growing in the grace of Jesus Christ our Lord and Savior.

But we can't grow if we don't know. That's the second injunction Peter lays out for us.

II. IT'S A GROWTH MANIFESTED IN LEARNING ABOUT JESUS

"But grow in grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ."

The word "know" is a theme throughout this letter. It means to know thoroughly, to know completely, to know accurately. In this case Peter is inviting us to know Christ more accurately, but it is more than just growing in our intellectual knowledge of Christ. We can read the Old Testament and learn all the Messianic prophecies related to Him.

We can read the Gospels and know all about His life and teachings.

We can read the Epistles and understand how they relate to Christ.

We can read Revelation and understand the end times and the return of Christ.

We can be puffed up with knowledge about Christ, but unless we really know Christ personally as our Savior all that knowledge only puts awards on our shelf or in frames that hang on the wall.

Peter's injunction invites us to know Christ in a way that will cultivate stability in our faith so that we can stand against those who would attempt to lead us astray.

It really speaks of fellowship with Him through time spent in His Word. It implies personal experience and a consistent fellowship.

Bruce Barton again writes that “believers ‘grow in knowledge’ as they search and study the Scriptures, pray, and listen to sound teachers, and (then) apply that knowledge to their daily lives.”

So knowing isn’t just learning facts, it’s living it out. Living it demonstrates that we understand it.

In the few years David has been taking math, his teachers have all emphasized showing his work on paper. It’s one thing to get the right answer, it’s an entirely different thing for him to work it out on paper so they can tell if he really understands the principles he’s learning.

Do we know who Jesus really is according to the Bible?

Do we know what it means that He is Christ?

What does it mean that He is Lord?

How is it that He is the Savior? What does that mean?

How does His name and titles impact me?

John Piper wrote that the Word isn’t just to be known, it is to be applied. Discipleship always includes information, but it is incomplete without emulation.

Someone wrote “the more we know of Him, the more of Him will be seen in our lives.”

The Bible gives us everything we need to know about Christ and how we are to live because we know Him.

And when that happens, it’s a growth manifested in loving Jesus.

III. IT’S A GROWTH MANIFESTED IN LOVING JESUS

“To Him be glory both now and forever! Amen.”

Living for Jesus and learning about Jesus is predicated on our love for Jesus. The more we love Him, the more we will live for Him and learn about Him. And the more we live for Him and learn

about Him, the more we will love Him. Quite simply, if there is no love for Jesus, there will be little desire to live for Him or learn about Him. But when we grow in both, then the result is giving Him glory both now and forever, glory that he deserves.

In both how we live for Christ and in what we learn about Christ, He will receive the glory, today and for eternity.

Peter underscores this with an affirmative AMEN, so be it or let it be so. It’s an exclamation point on how to stand strong in your faith.

We have been given the right conditions in which to live and learn. God has given us everything we need to grow in our spiritual walk with Christ through all the great and precious promises found in His Word.

We all need the right conditions in which to grow. Then he will be better able to grow in grace and knowledge of Christ.

As we come to communion today, spend some time reflecting on this verse.

How well are you growing in grace and knowledge of Jesus Christ our Lord and Savior?

What needs to change?

What steps will you take to make either or both a priority in your life?

There is a growing need for all of us to more earnestly grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

(Communion slide)