

### **Grow Together #3: Growing Mature in Christ (Colossians 1:21-2:3)**

#### **PRAY**

Think about the last time you went on a trip—you can even count travelling to church today  
Did you set out with a destination in mind? Of course you did... It's why we go out  
We have a goal... We want to get somewhere... Today, you wanted to get here  
Or, think of a particular project you've been working on recently  
Maybe you've been working on a house move, a school assignment, or on beating a game  
In this project, what is your aim? What is your goal? I'm certain you have one  
In basically every activity we participate in, we have a purpose, an aim, or a goal in mind  
In exercise or sports, cooking or eating, homework or housework, working or watching TV  
We may want to get stronger, to win, to succeed, to get smarter, to improve, to  
enjoy, to escape, to rest, to provide, or to survive  
If we don't have a goal, we'll coast aimlessly toward a meaningless existence  
Something that often happens when scrolling on our phones, by the way  
Or if we have a wrong goal, we'll usually end up at a wrong destination... Go figure

This fall, we're considering how we grow together as a church  
We've talked about how we need to be growing, while God gives the growth  
And how the gospel of Christ is to be the source and motive for our growth  
But I think we then need to ask: What are we aiming for? What is our goal in growing together?  
Because growth merely for the sake of growth is circular and pointless  
Like: When you come to church and seek to love others here, when you go to SG and discuss the  
Bible and pray and fellowship, when you teach others or are being taught yourself  
Why are you doing what you do? As we saw last week, I hope it's because Christ has saved you  
Yes, amen! That should be our *motivation* that compels us down the road of discipleship  
But that's the beginning... What's at the end of the road? Where do you want to get?  
What is the *goal* you're aiming for? It's got to be compelling, or you won't do it

Thankfully, I believe God's Word provides us with a clear goal of our discipleship—  
A destination we've set out for... Somewhere where all our sanctification is heading  
So please **TURN** with me to Colossians chapter 1... Colossians 1 **[page #981]**  
We'll spend today in this glorious passage that lays out the right goal of all ministry

You might hear this as a "Get to work!" kind of sermon, and that's OK, but it's also dangerous  
It's easy to misunderstand... So I want to be explicitly clear right up front:  
Remember the gospel: There is nothing you can *do* to earn the grace of God  
So we don't get to work in order to get God to love or like us more than he already does  
We're safe, secure... So we work not out of obligation but out of joyful gratitude  
Neither do we work hard in order to muster up our own spiritual growth,  
Since God is the one who gives any true growth... We get to work with him  
But all this doesn't mean growing spiritually is easy... It's not...  
Growing requires discipline, diligence, energy, endurance, and effort

[tr] While it may not be easy, I do believe our goal is quite simple:

When we grow together, we should be seeking to grow more like Christ  
And in case you don't think this very serious business, consider this surprising truth we'll see:

### **Christ died for our Christlikeness (1:21-23)**

[r] Jesus Christ laid down his life not only to save us from our sin,

But so that our lives would look increasingly like him

[r] Christ died for our Christlikeness

**READ v.21-22<sup>1</sup>**... We all were once alienated from God, hostile toward him, and evil in behavior

And you know what? Those things eat us up inside, whether we admit it or not

But Jesus has now made peace with those who believe, reconciling us, how?

Again, the gospel is the source... It's through his death on the cross—

in which he himself was alienated from God on our behalf,

absorbing all our hostility, and paying for all our evil

Why'd he do that? So that we could become "holy, blameless, above reproach"

In one most important sense, that has already happened, the moment we're saved

We will be presented as holy because we have been justified and declared righteous

Yet every one of us know we are not yet perfectly holy or blameless in our conduct

Still, Christ died to make us so... And we are continuously sanctified by the cross as well

I described this goal as "Christlikeness", as this describes Christ to a 'T'

Only Jesus was 100% perfectly holy, without blame, and above reproach

He had no sins for which to die, yet he chose to die in our place

The Father accepted his perfect sacrifice, evidenced by him raising Christ from the dead

When Jesus ascended as heaven's King, *he* was presented as holy and blameless forever

So now, if you will come to him, abandoning your alienation and relinquishing your hostility,

He will draw you near, declare you righteous, and start making you holy as well

I pray that you will do so, even today... We implore you: Be reconciled to God!

When Paul says here Christ died "*in order to present us*" holy,

Think of a radiant bride being presented on her wedding day, in splendour

Picture a proud dad, walking her down the aisle, presenting her to her groom

Or maybe even better, picture the groom walking out with her on his arm:

Like 'Check it out! That's my wife!'

That's Christ, presenting his people—his bride, to heaven's courts and his Father:

'Look at my wife! Isn't she spectacular? She wasn't perfect; but she sure is now!'

*That* was Christ's goal in death... To get us to that place

So shouldn't it be our goal as well, to work with him in preparing us for glory? Let's go!

Now, v.23 adds a condition on us arriving at this goal: **READ v.23<sup>2</sup>**

But before that 'if' really gets you concerned...

Notice that every verb here is present-tense: continue, stable, steadfast, not shifting

Which means that this is not speaking to what *might* happen in the future,

But instead, it's talking about what *is* happening in the present

So in essence: our present faith is proof of the past fact of our salvation<sup>3</sup>

[tr] Even young kids can understand the idea of becoming more and more like Jesus  
We think: Yeah, I want that! Especially if Christ *died* to make this happen!  
But while this may be a simple thing, it is most certainly not a small thing!  
Brothers and sisters, never underestimate the gravity and grandeur of Christlikeness  
See, we're talking about nothing less than the summit of human history  
Not only did Christ die for our Christlikeness, Colossians will tell us that:

### **History culminates with Christ in us (1:24-27)**

[r] Believe it or not: Our Christlikeness, via our union with Christ, is the climax of history  
[r] History culminates with Christ in us

That's effectively Paul's point over the next few verses: **READ v.24-27**<sup>4</sup>

Before we get to the glories of the latter parts there, we need to talk about suffering  
And first off, notice that even the suffering part of this passage is incredibly upbeat  
Paul says he was rejoicing in his sufferings for the sake of the Colossian church  
Not just tolerating or enduring them... *Rejoicing* in them  
The gospel is so transformative, that it even turns suffering on its head:  
From a purely bad thing—an evil result of the fall—to a redemptive power  
And truly: So many of us have experienced suffering as a powerful tool of growth!  
It might not feel very redemptive in the moment... It might only be painful  
But then, eventually, looking back on a time of suffering with hindsight,  
We see how we were changed in really powerful ways  
Thus, we can rejoice that God is at work to use our suffering in our and others' lives for good

But something else in v.24 may've tripped you up: **READ v.24**<sup>5</sup>

What in the world could be lacking in Christ's afflictions? What does he mean by that?  
For Christ's afflictions were complete... The cross was enough... No one could add to them  
But while Christ's afflictions weren't lacking in sufficiency or value or power,  
In a sense, they were lacking in finality... As believers' suffering didn't cease at the cross  
And, importantly, when Christ's people suffered, Christ himself suffered  
Think of when Paul himself was persecuting the church before being saved,  
And Jesus met him on the road, saying, "Saul, why are you persecuting *me*?"  
Christ's enemies hadn't gotten their fill yet of injuring Christ through his people<sup>6</sup>  
So there was suffering still to come for Christ, and for anyone following him  
And in this, Paul rejoiced... Because he was sacrificially suffering for other believers' sakes  
He knew his hurts would end in good growth in God's people

Paul took it as a God-given opportunity to be able to serve and minister to them:

"...*the church*": **READ v.25**<sup>7</sup>... Heh heh, good luck with that!

The word of God is inexhaustible... Its depths can never be fully plumbed  
But the topic of God's Word leads into what we'll focus on next week  
The Word is an absolutely vital tool for us growing together... Paul knew this  
So he was like, 'I've got to tell everyone all that I possibly can'

But in this case, he was referring to one main aspect of the Word: how it's revealed Christ  
**READ v.26-27**<sup>8</sup>... Do you like a good mystery?

I like the suspense as people try to crack a case, and the relief you feel when it's solved

But the mystery Paul is talking about isn't like the mysteries you'll find  
in Sherlock Holmes, CSI, Knives Out, or True Crime Pods  
He's using the word more broadly to describe something that was unknown but is now revealed:  
How God would ultimately save sinners and unite his global people  
There were clues people could've followed, say, in the Old Testament or in Creation  
But the solution wasn't discoverable until God revealed it when Jesus came  
Good news for us, though: We don't need to sit in centuries of suspense,  
As we're on the other side of the mystery of redemption being revealed  
It was hidden for ages... All of history was anticipating this... And now we know

What is this grand, glorious, revealed mystery? It is *"Christ in you, the hope of glory."*  
So the core of the mystery is Christ himself, as Paul will later specify  
But the way that God saves us, which we didn't know before, is Christ being united to us  
Christ in us... To cut through the deep theology here, in essence this means:  
That when Christ died, we died... And when Christ rose, we rose  
And now that Christ lives, we live... He is seated in glory  
So we are seated with him in glory, destined to be with him forever  
In the meantime, he indwells us by his Holy Spirit, continually changing us into his likeness

The more we grasp our being united to Christ, the more it actually empowers our transformation  
Christ is in us, and that gives us the power to be like Christ  
For those of you who like book recommendations, get your hands on *Deeper* by Dane Ortlund  
It's an amazing book, all about our union with Christ growing us  
The subtitle is *Real Change for Real Sinners*... I'm a real sinner, and I need real change  
And you do too... We don't need surface change for theoretical sinners  
Ortlund claims that growing in Christ is not as much about improving or adding or experiencing,  
As it is about deepening in what we already have  
It's about bringing what we do and say and feel into line with what we already are  
And what are we already? United to Christ, the hope of glory

Ortlund then explains four different ways Christians tend to understand growth  
He calls them 1. God then me, 2. God not me, 3. God plus me, and 4. God in me  
'God then me' sees the truth that God does everything to save us  
But then makes the error thinking it's then all up to me to change  
'God not me', on the other hand, takes the truth that God gives us the growth,  
But then obliterates any part we play, making us passive... God does it all  
'God plus me' is closer, in seeing growth as a collaborative effort—true  
But it gets off base in often thinking we're equal and separate contributors  
In the fourth approach, 'God in me', *"God does everything to save me, and then by his Holy Spirit he unites me spiritually to his Son. The result is that in our growth in holiness (as Jonathan Edwards put it) 'we are not merely passive in it, nor yet does God do some and we do the rest, but God does all, and we do all.'"*  
And Ortlund concludes: *"As far as sin in your life reaches, Christ and your union with him reach further. As deep as your failure goes, Christ and your union with him go deeper still... You have been strengthened with the power to fight and overcome sin because the power that raised Jesus from the dead now resides in you, living and active—for Jesus Christ himself resides in you."*

We could say so much more... But that's a whole other sermon series (or book)  
For today, just realize that a key, if not *the* key, to our spiritual growth  
is to let this truth bore deep into our hearts: "*Christ in you, the hope of glory.*"

[tr] Knowing this doesn't mean we sit back, letting go and letting God  
Really, we should be inspired to go deeper than ever  
As Paul goes on, he emphasizes just how much effort he was putting into this good work  
And the point I want us to take away is this:

### **We work hard to grow each other in Christlike maturity (1:28-2:1)**

[r] Believers ought to work hard to grow together to be spiritually mature—like Christ  
[r] We work hard to grow each other in Christlike maturity

**READ v.28-1<sup>9</sup>**... This is definitely the calling of every Christian leader

But I'd argue that, by extension, every Christian is called to live like this... Like:  
If you see a brother who doesn't understand the truth about God, teach him  
If you see a sister in need of wisdom, don't wait for a pastor to step in... speak the truth in love  
If you see a fellow believer in sin, don't just turn a blind eye to it... take them aside to warn them  
And in all of the above, be sure to proclaim Christ: "*Him* we proclaim, warning and teaching..."  
I think I can speak for everyone when I say: I don't know everything. And I sin in dumb ways.  
I need your teaching and warning, and you need mine... We need each other in this  
And most of all: We all need Christ... So let's keep pointing each other toward him

Paul saw this as so critically important, he was exerting himself to the extreme to do so  
He was reaching into all the depths of wisdom he could: **READ v.28b<sup>10</sup>**  
Presumably looking to the Scriptures for God's perfect wisdom  
Which, by the way, wasn't easily searchable on Google or Logos or Claude  
They had to rely on oral education, physical scrolls, and memory  
And Paul said he '*toiled*' at the goal of helping others grow spiritually in Christ  
The word he uses for toil means to 'work to the point of exhaustion'  
Picture a marathon runner, labouring, legs weak, and lungs burning  
Or picture a student in exam season studying through the night, eyes barely open  
Paul toiled, '*struggling*'—sometimes succeeding, sometimes failing, always fighting  
Struggling '*with all God's energy*'... All the energy God gave him, he put it towards this  
(More on that shortly) But the point is: Paul worked *hard* to help sanctify people  
And clearly, it was *worth* working so hard for... This was a worthwhile endeavour

And with what goal? Maturity in Christ... He wanted the people to become mature in Christ

**READ v.28c<sup>11</sup>**... Like Christ presenting us holy, we want to present each other mature  
Ephesians 4:12-15 outlines the same goal: "*And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, [he gave us various people and gifts] to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, [and what does mature manhood, or personhood, look like?] to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves... Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ...*"

What would it actually look like to be *‘mature in Christ’*?

Well, we can keep reading and meditating on Scripture to see how Christ lived

But we’re not just looking for actions or activities—we’re looking at his heart

Tim Challies explains that: *“What God cares about is not so much our achievements, qualifications, or accolades, but our character. It is distinctly Christian character that makes the gospel look great—powerful, transformative, and divine.”*

So I think we can look at the lists of godly character traits all over Scripture

Knowing that Christ exemplified and demonstrated them perfectly

Like the list we read last week in 2 Peter 1: faith, virtue, knowledge, self-control, steadfastness, godliness, brotherly affection, love

Or the list of the fruit of the Spirit that he is growing in us: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control

Or the things Paul tells us to run after in 2 Timothy 2:22: *“So flee youthful passions and pursue righteousness, faith, love, and peace, along with those who call on the Lord from a pure heart.”* ...Notice that we’re supposed to pursue these things *together*, side by side

But these qualities are what Christ looked like... This is what maturity in Christ looks like

Now, when we’re young, maturity tends to sound boring... Right, kids?

It sounds like boring adults working all the time, not playing, not smiling, not having fun  
But get that idea out of your head... If sinning equals having fun, then you want to be boring

And if being like Jesus is boring, then I don’t know what to tell you

Because being like him is tapping into the deepest part of being human

And it is the most fulfilling, satisfying, joy-giving way to live, ever

I guarantee you: the happiest people on earth are the holiest people

We can’t be afraid to work hard on our sanctification together

Don’t be allergic to work... Toil and struggle and work aren’t seen as negative things here at all

Hard things, sure... But worthy things, for certain: **READ v.29<sup>12</sup>**

So, super crucially: We don’t do this alone...

We work hard for each other, but with the energy that *God* powerfully works in us

Don’t forget where we started this series: We can’t work any true spiritual growth ourselves,

Apart from reliance on God and his work in us... And as we saw today, his union with us

Christ is in us... And that changes everything

So ask yourself today: Am I working hard at my spiritual growth? And at others’ growth?

Any sacrifice you make now steps right in the footsteps of Jesus... And his path led to glory!

So I wonder: Parents, are you sacrificing your sleep, your entertainment, or your comfort

In order to help build up and grow your kids, spiritually?

Kids, are you sacrificing some gaming time to come out to Calvary Youth or Awana?

University students, are you willing to sacrifice a percentage on some of your grades

In order to be active in discipleship in your local church?

All of us: Do we need to sacrifice a precious evening at home, or our kids’ precious sleep schedules, or our older kids’ precious sports schedules, or our overtime at work,

In order to put first things first and seek after the things of God together?

In short: Are we seeking out or creating opportunities to drive each other toward holiness, to encourage faith in the midst of suffering, to study the Word of God in community,

to show practical love to one another, and to speak peace into chaotic moments?  
I say none of this to guilt trip you... I sincerely hope becoming like Jesus sounds thrilling to you  
It may be costly, it may be exhausting, and it will be a lot of work  
But in the end, if we arrive at Christ and look like him? Nothing can compare!

And think of the difference that can make in us, in our homes, in our church, and in the world  
As Alastair Begg says: *"When Christians look like Christ, we glorify God and impact the world... What the church needs today is not primarily better programs or better apologetic resources or better buildings or more financial resources or greater political sway. What the church needs is Christians of increasingly Christlike character, so that what is found inside the church is radically different than the world outside the church."*

What I'd like you to do right now is to write down two questions

Then this week (today even), ask another believer you trust to answer them both for you:

**1. Where have you seen me grow in Christlikeness?**

Because I want you to be encouraged at how God has been maturing you  
We're often so focused on our failures, we're blind to good fruit that is growing  
Don't take pride in this, but give God the glory for it

The second question is harder:

**2. Where do you think I most need to grow in Christlikeness?**

Then don't interrupt... Really listen to what they have to say  
You don't need to defend yourself... Humble yourself before the Lord

Finally, you can pray together for wisdom on how to get to work in that area

[tr] You might feel this sounds hopeless or impossible... Will this growth ever really happen?

You may be no stranger to hard work... You may have struggled and toiled for years  
But I'm here to proclaim Christ to you today, and thereby hopefully give you hope

Because really good news: Our labour in the Lord will not be in vain... Take this to heart:

**Our loving togetherness leads to reaching the goal of Christ (2:2-3)**

[r] Remarkably, us loving one another and growing together will lead to mature Christlikeness

[r] Our loving togetherness leads to reaching the goal of Christ

We can see this here in Colossians... Again from v.1 of chapter 2: **READ v.1-3<sup>13</sup>**

Paul's ultimate aim is believers' maturity in Christ

And in the meantime, he wants them encouraged, loving, and assured in Christ

He was working hard in the hopes that they'd be 'knit together in love'

I don't knit... Don't know if that's a surprise to you or not... Not my idea of fun

But I'm sure most of you can picture someone knitting—maybe a sweater

Is a single thread of yarn strong on its own? No; alone we are weak

But if it's knit together with a number of other strands, it becomes strong

That's a picture of our loving togetherness... Our lives are to be intertwined with each other

And the result of being knit together like this? We will: **READ v.2b<sup>14</sup>**

Brothers and sisters, this isn't a fool's hope... This will happen... We will reach our goal

Eugene Peterson once labelled discipleship *"a long obedience in the same direction"*

But the direction has a destination: Jesus Christ... That's where we're headed

## CONCLUSION

And I pray our hearts are increasingly stirred to love him more and desire more of him  
There could be no more desirable, glorious, or happy goal  
Pastor Darryl Dash, a friend of mine, has told of growing up in a church that took God seriously  
They were allowed to have fun, but when it came to God, the fun ended  
It seemed the more spiritual you were, the less you'd smile or seem human  
So Darryl began to develop a really deficient, even ugly idea of Christian maturity:  
Serious, otherworldly, and unconcerned with everyday life... But he was wrong  
He says: *"Spiritual maturity isn't about white-knuckling it to sainthood. It's about becoming a person who is fully alive... It transforms our desires rather than denying them... We were made to grow and flourish, but sin has led to the loss of the world we want to live in. Spiritual growth is the opposite. It doesn't destroy; it gives life. God is in the business of restoring our humanity, giving us more joy, and renovating our desires."*  
And he most does this by captivating our hearts with the image and glory of Jesus Christ  
Friends, to pursue him is to pursue true happiness  
So may we learn to love Jesus together, fixing our eyes on him as our goal  
As we toil *"with all his energy that he powerfully works within"* us  
And we will become who he made us and saved us to be

## PRAY

**Benediction: prayer, 5min, 1 Cor. 15:58**

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<sup>1</sup> And you, who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him,

<sup>2</sup> if indeed you continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel that you heard, which has been proclaimed in all creation under heaven, and of which I, Paul, became a minister.

<sup>3</sup> HT W.R. Nicholson

<sup>4</sup> Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church, of which I became a minister according to the stewardship from God that was given to me for you, to make the word of God fully known, the mystery hidden for ages and generations but now revealed to his saints. To them God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.

<sup>5</sup> Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church

<sup>6</sup> HT MacArthur

<sup>7</sup> the church, of which I became a minister according to the stewardship from God that was given to me for you, to make the word of God fully known

<sup>8</sup> the mystery hidden for ages and generations but now revealed to his saints. To them God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.

<sup>9</sup> Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ. For this I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me. For I want you to know how great a struggle I have for you and for those at Laodicea and for all who have not seen me face to face

<sup>10</sup> teaching everyone with all wisdom

<sup>11</sup> that we may present everyone mature in Christ.

<sup>12</sup> For this I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me.

<sup>13</sup> For I want you to know how great a struggle I have for you and for those at Laodicea and for all who have not seen me face to face, that their hearts may be encouraged, being knit together in love, to reach all the riches of full assurance of understanding and the knowledge of God's mystery, which is Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.

<sup>14</sup> reach all the riches of full assurance of understanding and the knowledge of God's mystery