Growing in Grace

A Ministry for Equipping the Saints

Discipleship 201

Roger N. McNamara

Teacher's Edition
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Introduction

Welcome to Discipleship Class 201 – *Growing in Grace*. This class represents the first of three courses that make up the second level of our discipleship ministry. It is designed to help you develop the habits that will enable you to “grow in grace” so you can become a spiritually mature follower of Christ.

Life is habitual. We tend to do the same things over and over until they become automatic responses. We follow the same routines day after day. We eat the same cereals for breakfast. We drive the same route to work. We engage in the same activities for relaxation. We follow the same worship format in church week after week. Life would be virtually impossible if it were not for the habits we form.

God wants us to “grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ” (II Peter 3:18). As believers, he wants us to be growing spiritually so we can become more like Christ in our attitudes and actions. He wants us to become spiritually mature individuals who function on the basis of biblical principles rather than reacting the way non-Christians often do.

Before we put our faith and trust in Christ to save us, we developed numerous habits that governed how we lived and reacted. Many of those habits were self-centered, selfish, and unbiblical. Now, as believers, God wants us to replace those sinful habits with godly habits that will help us grow in our relationship with him as well as with others.

First Timothy 4:7 tells us we are to exercise ourselves unto godliness. We are to develop the spiritual disciplines (routines) that enable us to grow into mature followers of Jesus Christ. The Apostle Paul teaches that we are to put off the “old man” (sinful habits) and to replace it with the “new man” (godly habits). This is known as dehabituation and rehabituation. These new behavioral patterns are commonly referred to as “habits.” Godly habits enable us to grow into spiritually mature individuals.

*Growing in Grace* has been written to help you develop seven godly habits that will enable you to grow spiritually and to become a mature follower of Christ. The nine lessons contained herein will explain what is involved in growing spiritually and how to do it.

Growing spiritually is a process that takes place over time. This set of lessons is part of a series of studies designed to help people progress along a continuum from spiritual rebirth to spiritual maturity. They may be used for individual study, for course material in a Sunday School class or in a small group setting.

As you read and study, take an honest look at your life. Identify those habits and responses that need to be replaced. Then work at developing the habits of a godly person by applying the biblical principles taught in this manual. You will grow spiritually, and you will become more like Christ as you do so.

Your Servant in Christ,

*Roger N. McNamara*

Church Planting Training Specialist
Baptist Mid-Missions
RNMcNamara@juno.com
Lesson # 1

Growing In Grace
II Peter 3:18

Thank you so very much for joining us today. You are about to launch on one of the greatest adventures of your life. No, we are not going white water rafting. We’re not going to cross the Sahara Desert and we are not going to climb the highest mountain in the world. We are going to do something far more exciting and far more spectacular than that. I am going to teach you seven spiritual disciplines that will change your life!

People say they have a hard time deciphering God’s will for their lives. There may be some aspects of God’s will where that may be true, but by and large, God’s will is EASY to find. He has written it out in black and white and put it in his sacred Word, the Bible. In dozens of areas of life, God has already told us what he wants us to do.

We know what God is up to. We know what his ultimate goal is. He tells us exactly what he is seeking to accomplish in Romans 8:29 when he says:

“For whom he did foreknow, he also did predestinate to be CONFORMED TO THE IMAGE OF HIS SON.”

There it is. God’s goal for you is to so transform your life that you will resemble Jesus Christ in word, deed, and thought. He wants you to be growing, to be changing, to be becoming more like Jesus Christ every day. That sounds great. That sounds idealistic. That even sounds a little bit scary, but the question is – “HOW DO YOU DO THAT?”

That is what we are going to talk about today.

The COMMAND to Grow in Grace

When a person accepts Jesus Christ as his/her personal Savior a spiritual transformation takes place in that person’s life. The Bible refers to this as a new birth, a spiritual birth, a second birth or as being born again (John 3:3-7).

John 1:12,13 puts it this way:

“But as many as received him (Jesus), to them gave he power to become the SONS OF GOD, even to them that believe on his name; Which were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but OF GOD.”

When people put their faith and trust in Jesus Christ they pass from death to life (John 5:24), from darkness to light (Acts 26:18), and from condemnation to acceptance by God (Romans 8:1). They become the “sons” (children) of God (I John 3:1).
A Parallel between the Spiritual and the Physical

There is a parallel between our new-found spiritual life in Christ and our physical lives. When we are born physically, we are born as immature, undeveloped little babies. We can’t walk. We can’t talk. We can’t care for ourselves. We are totally dependent upon others for our welfare. It is only as we receive nourishment and begin to exercise our arms and legs, and start to develop certain habits, that we are able to grow into strong, mature adults capable of reproducing ourselves.

The same thing is true spiritually when we are born a second time. When we trust Christ as our Savior we are born again into the family of God as immature, underdeveloped spiritual infants. First Corinthians 3:1 refers to new Christians as “babes in Christ” and First Peter 2:2 calls them “newborn babes.” They are baby Christians.

Just as physical babies need to grow in order to survive, so spiritual babies need to grow spiritually if they are to become strong, mature Christians. Sadly, that is not the case for many believers. They have never grown beyond spiritual infancy because they never learned the spiritual disciplines that enable people to grow spiritually. They didn’t develop the habits that produce spiritual growth.

God wants us to Grow Spiritually

There is no doubt about what God’s will is for you and me in this area. He wants us to grow from spiritual infancy to spiritual maturity. The idea of growing spiritually is found in our text in Second Peter 3:18 where we read these words:

“But GROW in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.”

The same concept is found in First Peter 2:2 where we are told:

“As newborn babes, desire the sincere milk of the word, that ye may GROW thereby.”

Turn over to Ephesians 4:13 and you’ll discover the idea of growing spiritually once again. Notice what it says:

“But we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a PERFECT MAN, unto the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.”

The word translated “perfect” doesn’t mean sinless. Rather it carries the idea of MATURITY, of being fully developed, of being grown up. In the next verse (vs. 14) the Apostle Paul talks about being “no more children,” no longer spiritually immature, no longer acting like a child. Instead, we are to be fully developed, spiritually mature, functioning like a grown up Christian should function.

It is God’s will for you to grow spiritually in his grace and to become a fully functioning follower of Jesus Christ.

The CONSTERNATION over Growing in Grace

There is one big problem when it comes to growing in grace - a lot of people who claim to be Christians aren't doing it. They are not growing spiritually.
The Problem with not Growing

Almost every problem in churches can be traced to the fact that believers are not growing spiritually. Instead, many times they act like spiritual infants. Rather than exhibiting Christlike character and following biblical principles in their relationships with others when there is conflict, they function more like spiritual infants than mature adults. They pick up their marbles and go home. That is wrong!

Millions of people sit in Bible-teaching churches all over America and have been there for years, but are not growing spiritually. Sitting week after week under the teaching of God’s Word WILL NOT, by itself, make you a spiritually mature Christian! A baby can sit in a tub of milk all day long and will not grow any more than a believer sitting in a pew listening to good preaching will produce spiritual growth.

This is not a new problem. In Hebrews 5:12 the Apostle Paul rebuked a group of Hebrew Christians for their spiritual immaturity and lack of growth when he said:

“For when for the time ye OUGHT TO BE TEACHERS, ye have need that one teach you again which be the first principles of the oracles of God and are become such as have need of MILK and not of strong MEAT.”

A similar situation existed in the Corinthian church to whom Paul wrote these words:

“And I, brethren, could not speak unto you as unto spiritual, but as unto carnal, even as unto BABES in Christ. I have fed you with MILK, and not with MEAT, for hitherto ye were not able to bear it, neither yet now are ye able.” (I Corinthians 3:1,2)

Spiritual Growth is Intentional

Spiritual growth doesn’t just happen. It does not occur by osmosis. It doesn’t come from exposure to nourishment. Spiritual growth is INTENTIONAL. It occurs because the people involved develop the habits and follow the routines that produce growth. Growth requires commitment. It requires effort. It requires discipline, and it requires time.

In Philippians 2:12 Paul instructs us to “WORK OUT your own salvation with fear and trembling.” He is not saying we are to work FOR our salvation. He is not saying that salvation is dependent upon our works. Rather, he is saying, “Now that you have salvation, put it to work, make it work, work to develop it to full maturity.”

We become whatever we are committed to. Spiritual maturity is not measured by what you profess to believe. Rather it is demonstrated by your behavior, by your actions, and by your attitude. Embracing creeds and confessions is a good thing. Letting people know what you believe is good, but growing in grace is seen in our CONDUCT, in our CHARACTER, and in the things we are COMMITTED to doing.

James 2:18 says:

“Shew me thy faith without thy works, and I will shew thee my faith BY MY WORKS.”

In Mathew 7:16 Jesus said:

“Ye shall know them BY THEIR FRUITS” or by the things they do.
Even though God wants us to be growing spiritually, relatively few believers actually are maturing in their relationship with the Lord. Many don’t have any idea how it is done, so, let’s look at some of the clues to unlocking the gate to spiritual growth.

**The CLUES for Growing in Grace**

Growing spiritually is not difficult to understand. God, in his Word, has told us what we have to do in order to grow spiritually so we can become mature Christians.

**Spiritual Growth is a Process**

We need to recognize first of all that growing spiritually is a PROCESS rather than an event. It doesn’t happen overnight. It takes time to grow spiritually just as it takes time to grow physically. A person begins growing spiritually as soon as he/she is born again, but it will take months and years of learning, teaching, and implementing biblical changes before we reach maturity.

Ephesians 4:13 starts out with these words, “Till we all COME in the unity of the faith.” The word “come” speaks of a destination toward which we are journeying. Maturity is the destination toward which we are to be progressing every day of our lives. There will be setbacks along the way. There almost certainly will be potholes that may delay us. There will be hardships to be endured, but we are to be constantly moving forward in our walk with Christ.

**Spiritual Growth is based on our Choices**

Spiritual growth is the result of the choices we make. When we make good choices we progress in our walk with God. When we make wrong choices we regress spiritually. In Ephesians 4:22 the Apostle Paul tells us to “PUT OFF concerning the former conversation (lifestyle) the old man which is corrupt according to the deceitful lusts.”

The “old man” refers to our former way of living before we were saved. It is the way we responded to life, and the trials and temptations that came our way. It refers to our old sinful nature. In Scripture it is referred to as the “flesh.” The “old man” is self-centered, feeling oriented, and desire dominated. He tends to act and react on the basis of his feelings and the habits he has formed over the years.

Paul says STOP doing the things you used to do. STOP making the choices you used to make. Break the sinful habits that characterized your life before you were saved. Don’t let your feelings control what you do and how you act. In other words, take control of your actions, and then change.

In verse 24 Paul tells us to “PUT ON the new man, which after God is created in righteousness and true holiness.”

The “new man” is just the opposite of the “old man.” The “new man” is God-centered rather than self-centered. He is command oriented rather than feeling oriented, and he is Spirit controlled rather than desire dominated. We are to START doing the things we should do rather than the things we shouldn’t do. Paul is talking about replacement actions here. He wants us to replace old habits with new habits. He wants us to stop making bad choices and starting making godly choices that honor God and help us grow spiritually. The choice is ours. As believers in Christ we get to decide the choices we make and the habits we form.
Our goal should be to please God rather than pleasing ourselves. The key to making that happen is found in verse 23 where Paul says: “And be RENEWED in the spirit of your mind.” The word “renewed” means to renovate, to replace, to get rid of the old, and replace it with something new.

There is a difference between redecorating and renovating your kitchen. If you redecorate, you may paint the walls, polish the wood, and move stuff around. But if you renovate, you haul out the countertops, replace the cabinets, put down new flooring, and buy a new stove and fridge. God doesn’t want us to redecorate our lives and to dress things up. He wants us to do a total overhaul of the way we think, the values we hold, and the habits we form. He wants us to replace old sinful habits with new godly ones. If you are going to grow spiritually you have to look at life from God’s perspective. Your objective needs to be to PLEASE HIM in everything you do.

**Spiritual Growth requires Exercise**

Growth occurs as we exercise ourselves unto godliness. I Timothy 4:7 says: “Exercise thyself rather unto godliness.” The word “exercise” is the Greek word (“gumnaze”) from which we get our English word “gymnasium.” It refers to a disciplined routine of exercise. Don’t you hate that idea? Its talking about repetition, about doing the same things over and over until they become habitual, automatic responses.

Perhaps you go to the gym several times a week to work out. You follow a disciplined routine of stretching, walking, swimming, and lifting of weights to produce the results you want. In the same way, Christian character and spiritual maturity are built by the habits we develop. If you don’t develop godly habits you’re not going to grow spiritually. If you don’t build spiritual disciplines and routines into your life you will not reach maturity. We could translate First Timothy 4:7 this way: “Take the time and trouble to keep yourself spiritually fit.”

My wife and I stay in shape physically by walking on the treadmill almost every day. It is a habit we formed years ago. But we have also built into our lives certain spiritual disciplines that enable us to grow spiritually and to stay fresh in the ministry. We have developed the daily habit of spending time with God through prayer, and seeking spiritual nourishment by reading his Word together.

Over the next several weeks I am going to teach you some of those same spiritual disciplines so you can begin to exercise them in your own life and walk with Christ. As you do so, and as you turn them into daily habits, you will begin to grow spiritually more than you ever dreamed possible. I hope you’ll come back next week, and every week thereafter as we study how to Grow in Grace.
Lesson # 2

Progressive Sanctification

The Importance of Developing Godly Habits

II Corinthians 7:1

Welcome back to our second class on how to GROW IN GRACE.

As believers in Jesus Christ, God is in the process of changing our lives and conforming us to the image of his Son (Romans 8:29). He wants to radically change our value systems, the way we think, the way we act and react, the things we do, and the way we function in life. Spiritual growth is an ongoing process that brings about change in our lives.

In theological terms these ongoing changes are known as SANCTIFICATION. First Thessalonians 4:3 says: “For this is the WILL OF GOD, even your SANCTIFICATION.”

Some form of that word (“sanctification”) is found at least one hundred thirty-seven times in the Bible. It is described variously in Scripture as “growing in grace” (II Peter 3:18), “walking in the Spirit” (Galatians 5:17), “being conformed to the image of Christ” (Romans 8:29), and as the “Put Off – Put On” principle for growing spiritually (Ephesians 4:22-24).

One of the best descriptions of sanctification is found in Second Corinthians 7:1 where we find these words from the pen of the Apostle Paul:

“Having therefore these promises, dearly beloved, Let us CLEANSE ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, PERFECTING HOLINESS in the fear of God.”

Just as a child’s development and maturity progress as he grows, so the believer matures in his/her relationship with Christ as he grows spiritually.

Much of life is habitual. We do the same things over and over until they become habits, and then we do them without thinking. All habits are not the same. Some are good and some are bad. Some habits can become binding and restrictive. They hurt us rather than help us. They are often referred to as “addictions” or “dependencies.” Examples of these would include such things as alcohol consumption, illicit use of drugs, smoking, impure thinking, anger and bitterness, among other things.

Other habits are liberating and beneficial. They help us function well and enable us to grow physically and spiritually. The habits we form are simply CHOICES we have made so often they become automatic responses. Making the right choices and developing the right habits are vital to our sanctification and to our spiritual development. We cannot grow in grace without them.

So, let’s explore what the Bible has to say about our sanctification, and the habits we need to develop in order to become more like the Lord Jesus.
Sanctification falls into three distinct CATEGORIES

The biblical concept of sanctification is described in Scripture in three distinct ways. First, there is...

Positional Sanctification.

Positional sanctification has to do with our standing, our relationship to God, and the way he sees us in Christ. When God looks at the believer he sees him as being already sanctified. He sees the finished product. In his mind, you have already been set apart unto him and have been declared to be holy.

In First Corinthians 6:9-11 the Apostle Paul gives us a long list of sins that characterized the Corinthians BEFORE they were saved and then he says:

"Such WERE some of you; but ye are washed, but ye ARE SANCTIFIED, but ye are justified in the name of the Lord Jesus by the Spirit of our God."

Notice that sanctification is referred to as a completed action: “such WERE some of you; but ye ARE sanctified.” In the past they had sued one another in court, defrauded each other, and had engaged in immoral behavior. They had been idolaters, thieves, drunkards, and extortionists. BUT NOW, for many of them, all that changed when they trusted Christ as Savior.

Now they were washed from their sins. Now they were sanctified and set apart for God’s use. Now they were justified and declared to be righteous in the sight of God (vs. 11). They stopped their customary way of behaving and replaced their old habits with new habits that were pleasing to God.

The moment a person receives Christ as his/her personal Savior, that person is declared “sanctified” and is set apart by God for his usage. God lays claim to your life the moment you believe on Christ and he says, "You are mine. You belong to me. I hereby set you apart for MY holy use." As far as God is concerned, sanctification is a completed transaction. In his view it is already done and is as good as accomplished.

It is for this reason Christians are referred to as “saints” ninety-nine times in Scripture. You don't become a saint by living a godly life and then being canonized by the church. You become a saint by receiving Christ as your personal Savior and allowing God to apply Christ's righteousness to your account.

In First Corinthians 1:30 we read: "But of him are ye IN CHRIST JESUS who of God is made unto us wisdom, and righteousness, and SANCTIFICATION, and redemption." The moment a person is saved he is set apart unto God and is declared to be a saint because he has already been sanctified in the sight of God.

Progressive Sanctification

Progressive sanctification refers to the practical aspects of living a life that is pleasing to God on a daily basis. This IS reality. It is where we live. It is where the rubber meets the road. It is the struggle we experience as we battle sinful desires and seek to live in obedience to Christ here on earth. This is when we learn to break the old sinful habits and to replace them with new godly habits.
It is a wonderful thing that God views us as being holy already, but experientially it is not yet a reality in my daily life. I still have a long way to go before sanctification become actual in my life. I still struggle with temptations of the flesh. I still have problems with pride. I still do things I know I shouldn’t do.

On a practical, daily level you will find that sanctification is an ongoing, life-long process of developing the habits that help you become more like Christ. It is here you learn day by day to resist the natural impulses of the old sinful nature, and to replace them with attitudes and actions that are pleasing to God.

It is here we learn to "grow in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ" (II Peter 3:18). It is on this level that we learn to "set your affection on things above; not on things on the earth" (Colossians 3:2).

Progressive sanctification puts into practice on a practical level that which we know we should be doing. It is the essence of what we are told in First Thessalonians 4:4 when it says: “That every one of you should know how to POSSESS his vessel in SANCTIFICATION and honour.” This progressive phase of sanctification is ongoing and continual. It is a process that is not complete until the Lord calls us home to heaven.

**Perfect Sanctification.**

Perfect sanctification is when sanctification becomes a reality for us. It looks forward to a future time when sin, temptation, and the flesh will no longer pull us down. It is when positional sanctification and progressive sanctification come together and become one and the same.

Sanctification will not be fully realized until Christ comes to take us to heaven. In First Thessalonians 5:23 Paul speaks of God sanctifying “you wholly” or completely. He associates this with the Second Coming of Christ when he says:

>“And the very God of peace SANCTIFY YOU WHOLLY; and I pray God your whole spirit and soul and body be preserved blameless unto the COMING of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

In First Thessalonians 3:13 he prays:

>“The Lord make you to increase and abound in love one toward another, and toward all men, even as we do toward you to the end he may stablish your hearts UNBLAMEABLE IN HOLINESS before God, even our Father at the COMING of our Lord Jesus.”

This expectation of being made holy, of being conformed to the image of Christ, provides us with a strong motivation to live so as to please God today. First John 3:3 says "every man that hath THIS HOPE in him PURIFIETH himself, even as he [Christ] is pure." When Christ comes again we will experience true holiness as the process of living lives that are pleasing to God reaches it culmination.

**Sanctification has to do with our COMMITMENTS**

Commitments may or may not be good depending on what we are committed to, and whether or not those commitments draw us closer to God. Sanctification focuses on being committed to the Lord.
Set Apart for God

The word "sanctify" means to separate, to set apart, to dedicate. It is to reserve something for a particular purpose. We might use the word "commit" to describe the same idea today. The Greek word that is translated as "sanctify" ("hagiasmos") is the SAME WORD that is translated "holy" or "holiness."

To sanctify something or someone is to declare it holy. It is to set it aside for a holy purpose or to commit it to God's use. Once a person or thing was “sanctified,” it was considered holy and was to be used in a way pleasing to God. A man could sanctify his house (Leviticus 27:14), his land (Leviticus 27:16), his children (Exodus 13:2), a particular day of the week (Deuteronomy 5:12), or even himself (Exodus 19:22). When we talk about believers being sanctified we're talking about them committing their lives to holy living, to growing in grace, and to becoming more like Jesus on a daily basis.

Whatever we are Committed to Determines what we Become

Commitments are important because we become whatever we are committed to. Those who perform with excellence do so because they are committed to excellence. Those who have strong marriages have them because they are committed to building strong marriages. Those who become doctors and lawyers do so because they have committed themselves to achieving those goals. Whatever we dedicate ourselves to do or to become determines our character and our spiritual maturity. It requires commitment, effort, and dedication to become a mature follower of Christ. Maturity is intentional rather than automatic.

You have to want to grow, you have to decide to grow, and you have to make an effort to grow. That takes commitment. If you are to be truly sanctified, if you are to set yourself apart for God to use, then you have to commit yourself to developing the habits that will make it happen.

Sanctification is the result of our CHOICES

Life is filled with choices, and those choices determine how we live and whether or not we grow to spiritual maturity. Joshua challenged the children of Israel to “CHOOSE you this day whom ye will serve” (Joshua 24:15). He understood that life is based on the decisions we make.

Every day we make thousands of choices that either enhance or hinder our spiritual growth. We either grow and become more like Christ or we retrogress and become less like him depending on our choices.

Choices become Habits

If you make a choice often enough it will become a subconscious, automatic response. You’ll make it without thinking or being aware of it. That is what we call a HABIT. The habits we develop are based upon the choices we make. In Romans 6:13 we are told:

“Neither YIELD (that’s a choice) ye your members as instruments to unrighteousness unto sin, but YIELD (that’s another choice) yourselves unto God as those that are alive from the dead and your members as instruments of righteousness unto God.”

If we repeatedly choose to yield ourselves as “instruments of unrighteousness” (if we make bad choices and refuse to do what God says) we will develop sinful habits that keep us from growing spiritually. If, on the other hand, we repeatedly choose to yield ourselves as “instruments of righteousness” (if we make good choices and live in obedience to God) we will develop godly habits that promote spiritual growth.
Choices become habits and habits become automatic responses that control our lives. Look at Romans 6:16 where it says:

“Know ye not, that to whom ye yield (there’s that choice again) yourselves servants to obey, his SERVANTS ye are to whom ye obey.”

The word “servant” (“doulos”) is the word for SLAVE. We become enslaved by the choices we make and the habits we form. The habits we develop will either lead us away from God and spiritual maturity or they will lead us closer to God and spiritual maturity.

Webster’s Dictionary defines a habit as “a continual, often unconscious inclination to do a certain activity, acquired through FREQUENT REPETITION.” It goes on to say that a habit is “an ESTABLISHED disposition of the character,” meaning that a person’s character is a habitual way of doing things. If you want to develop Christ-like character, then you need to develop godly habits or habits that produce godliness.

The Put Off – Put On Principle

If we are going to grow in grace, if we are going to experience progressive sanctification, if we are to become spiritually mature, then we have to PUT OFF the “old man” and his habits, and PUT ON the “new man” with his replacement habits (Ephesians 4:22-24).

The “old man” refers to our sin nature. It is that tendency we all have to live our lives independently of God – to do what we want to do regardless of what God says. Sinful habits have become entrenched in our lives as a result. The Apostle says we must put off those habits. We must say “no” to them. We are to break those old, sinful habits and replace them with new habits that promote godliness in our lives.

Look in Second Corinthians 7:1 where it says:

“Let us CLEANSE OURSELVES from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit (break the old habits, stop doing those things, put off the “old man”) [and instead] PERFECTING HOLINESS in the fear of God (develop new godly habits, put on the “new man”).”

The same idea is found in Romans 6:19 where we find these words:

“For as ye have yielded (choice) your members servants to uncleaness and to iniquity unto iniquity; EVEN SO (in the same way, to the same degree, with the same level of intensity and commitment) now yield (choice) your members servants to righteousness unto holiness.”

Habits are developed through disciplined routines. In other words, we must discipline ourselves to do the things that produce spiritual growth. That is why Paul told Timothy to “exercise thyself rather unto godliness” (I Timothy 4:7). He is saying we need to “establish disciplined routines, develop habits that lead to godliness.”

How Progressive Sanctification Works

Spiritual growth and the Christian life are often cyclical. Progressive sanctification (growing in grace) looks something like this, although it is not always in this order or this easily identified:

1) First, there is a desire for change. We become dissatisfied with things as they are.
2) Then we learn some biblical truth about what God wants us to do.

3) Next we apply that truth to our lives again and again until it becomes a habit, and change begins to take place. This leads to joy, happiness, and rejoicing in the growth we are experiencing. Little by little we are becoming more like Christ.

4) This, however, often leads to complacency, carelessness, and the cessation of those godly habits we developed. We stop reading our Bibles. We stop praying and going to church. We fail to deal with petty offenses in a biblical fashion.

5) Once this begins to happen, it is not long until we experience some sin or failure in our lives as we rely on ourselves rather than on God for help. Instead of growing in grace we start to regress in our relationship with God and others.

6) This eventually leads to enslavement, repentance, confession, cleansing, restoration, and a new seeking for biblical truth from God's Word as we start the process of growing again.

Gradually we learn to "put off" the old, sinful thought processes and value systems, and replace them by "putting on" new God-honoring thought processes and value systems that eventually become habits. This process continues throughout our life time as we grow and mature spiritually. In the process we are renewing our minds and setting ourselves apart unto God as we develop godly habits that enable us to grow even more. This is progressive sanctification in action.

In the weeks to come we will look at seven habits every believer should build into his life if he is to grow spiritually and become a mature follower of Christ.
Lesson # 3

Growing in Grace involves Spiritual Nourishment

The Habit of Pursuing God

I Peter 2:2

We are studying how to “GROW IN GRACE,” how to move from where we are on our spiritual continuum to the goal of spiritual maturity. Our objective is to daily become more like the Lord Jesus Christ in thought, word, and deed.

We have already seen that it is God’s intention to conform us to the image of his son, the Lord Jesus (Romans 8:29). When a person accepts Jesus Christ as his personal Savior, that person is born spiritually into the family of God. He becomes a child of God. He is born as a spiritual infant. He is spiritually immature and needs to grow to spiritual maturity.

In Second Peter 3:18 believers are commanded to “grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.” Spiritual growth is neither accidental nor automatic. It doesn’t just happen. It is INTENTIONAL and is the result of the habits and spiritual disciplines we build into our lives.

Spiritual disciplines are simply habits we develop in our lives. They are routines we follow on a regular basis. First Timothy 4:7 says: “EXERCISE thyself unto godliness.”

The word “exercise” is the word for “gymnasium.” It speaks of developing disciplined routines that result in a godly lifestyle. The habits you develop will determine your character. You are what you do, and you do what you are. Developing godly habits will result in godly character.

Habits are determined by the CHOICES we make (Romans 6:16) and by the level of COMMITMENT we give to them. In Romans 6:19 the Apostle Paul says this to the believers of his day:

“For as ye have yielded your members servants to uncleanness and to iniquity unto iniquity; EVEN SO NOW yield your members servants to righteousness unto holiness.”

In other words, be as committed to developing godly habits as you were to practicing the ungodly habits that formerly characterized your life. Serve Christ with the same passion and determination as you used to serve sin.

In Ephesians 4:22 we are taught that we are to “put off” the former conversation of the “old man.” It carries the idea of taking off a garment and laying it aside. The “former conversation” refers to the habits and the lifestyle that characterized our lives before we trusted Christ as Savior. We are to BREAK those habits, to STOP engaging in the practices that governed our lives before we came to Christ.

In verse 24 we are told to “put on” the “new man which after God is created in righteousness and true holiness.” Here, the idea is to put on a replacement garment. Having taken off the old, we are to replace it with the new. Having broken the sinful habits that governed our lives before we came to Christ we are now to develop new habits that will enable us to grow spiritually and to become like Christ.
There are at least SEVEN habits every believer should develop in his life which will enable him to grow spiritually in his relationship with God. The first one is the habit of PURSUING GOD. This involves learning to nourish ourselves spiritually as we explore God’s Word, the Bible, on a regular basis.

In First Peter 2:2 we read:

“As newborn babes, desire the sincere MILK OF THE WORD, that ye may GROW thereby.”

Just as a human baby needs nourishment in order to grow physically, so the believer needs spiritual nourishment in order to grow spiritually. That spiritual nourishment comes from the Word of God. There are six routines (steps, exercises, practices) a believer needs to implement in his life in order to develop the habit of PURSUING GOD and nourishing himself spiritually.

1st Routine: HEAR the Word of God

Hearing involves Listening

Romans 10:17 tells us:

“So then faith cometh by HEARING, and hearing by the Word of God.”

Just as milk provides a baby with the nourishment it needs to grow, so the Word of God contains the spiritual nourishment believers need in order to mature. We grow spiritually as we expose ourselves to God’s Word on a regular basis.

There are a number of avenues available to us for “hearing” the Word of God including attending the preaching services of a local church, listening to sermon tapes and cd’s, participating in small group Bible studies, reading recommended books, and by listening to good Christian radio programs.

The Bible repeatedly admonishes us to “hear” what God says. Eight times in the gospels Jesus said, “He that hath ears to hear, let him hear” (Matthew 11:15;13:9;13:43; Mark 4:9;4:23;7:16; Luke 8:8;14:35). In James 1:19 we are told to "be swift to hear." Over and over in the book of Revelation we read: “If any man have an ear, let him hear” (Revelation 2:7;2:11;2:17;2:29;3:6;3:13;3:22;13:9).

So, the first step is to expose ourselves to the Word of God as it is read, taught or proclaimed through a variety of media.

Hearing involves Heeding

“Hearing” involves more than listening. It includes taking heed to what we hear. In Luke 8:18 Jesus said we should “take heed” not only to what we hear, but to HOW we hear. We should listen with an eager mind to learn and with a ready attitude to do what we hear. There should be a willingness to comply with whatever we hear taught from the Word of God.

As you listen, take notes, write down key points so you can remember them and consult them in the future. Hebrews 2:1 tells us to “give the more earnest heed to the things which we have heard, lest at any time we should let them slip.” Most of what we hear is forgotten within a matter of days and is lost, so write it down. Bring a small spiral notebook to church with you and jot down the things you want to remember. Take notes on each sermon and Bible lesson you hear.
“Hearing” is the simplest and easiest routine to practice. That is why it is placed first in the series of steps that lead to the habit of spiritually nourishing yourself.

2nd Routine: READ the Word of God

There are a number of passages in which we are encouraged to read the Word of God. In First Thessalonians 5:2 Paul wrote this admonition to the Thessalonian believers. He said: “I charge you by the Lord that this epistle be READ unto all the holy brethren.” In First Timothy 4:13 he instructed Timothy to “give attention to READING.” In Revelation 1:3 we find this promise: “Blessed (happy) is he that READETH, and they that HEAR the words of this prophecy.” Happiness, joy, encouragement, understanding, and spiritual growth all come from reading the Word of God on a regular basis.

Develop a Reading Routine

Establish a regular routine for reading your Bible. Develop the habit of reading your Bible every day. Deuteronomy 17:19 gives us this instruction when it says: “And it shall be with him, and he shall READ therein ALL THE DAYS of his life.”

Set aside a specific place and time when you can read without being distracted or interrupted. Keep a notebook handy to jot down ideas and key passages you find. Underline or highlight important verses you want to find again. Read systematically all the way through a book rather than jumping around from place to place.

Set the goal of reading all the way through the Bible in a year’s time. It only takes about fifteen minutes a day to do that. Choose a reading plan and stick with it. Read out loud to yourself or with your spouse so your mind doesn’t wander. As you read look for a promise to claim, a command to obey, an admonition to heed, a corrective action to take, a temptation to avoid or a sin to confess.

Reading the Bible is Beneficial

Second Timothy 3:16 tells us the Bible is profitable or beneficial for four things:

- It is profitable for doctrine - it tells us what is right;
- It is profitable for reproof - it tells us what is not right;
- It is profitable for correction - it tells us how to make things right;
- It is profitable for instruction in righteousness - it tells us how to keep things right.

Therefore, it is vitally important for us to develop the spiritual discipline of reading our Bibles on a daily basis.

3rd Routine: STUDY the Word of God

Second Timothy 2:15 says that we should:

“STUDY to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the Word of truth.”
Apply Yourself to Studying the Bible

The word “study” is the word for diligence, for examining something carefully, for applying one’s self to a task. In Acts 17:11 we are told that the Bereans “received the word with all readiness of mind, and SEARCHED the Scriptures daily, whether those things were so.” They didn’t accept what they heard until they had searched it out for themselves and determined that it was true.

Anyone can learn to study if he wants to, and if he is willing to discipline himself to do so. Someone has said the difference between reading and studying is that you use a pencil when you study. Studying is simply a matter of asking the right questions, questions such as Who? What? When? Where? Why? and How? and then jotting down the answers.

Acquire resources that will help you in studying the Bible such as a Thompson Chain Reference Bible or a Life Application Bible. Obtain a good concordance or a Bible word search program for your computer along with a Bible handbook, a dictionary, and individual study books.

Interpret Scripture within its Context

As you study always keep the text within its context. Don’t take a verse out of its setting and isolate it by itself. Otherwise, it will become a pretext that does not accurately reflect what the Bible actually says. Remember as you study, if the common sense makes good sense, seek no other sense. God gave his Word to ordinary men in terminology that could be understood by the common man.

Every teacher will tell you they receive spiritual nourishment from God’s Word as they study it for themselves, and so will you.

4th Routine: MEMORIZE the Word of God

Psalm 119:11 says:

“Thy word have I hid in mine heart, that I might not sin against thee.”

In Proverbs 6:21, the son was told to take the commandments of his father and “bind them continually upon thine heart.” A similar statement is found in Proverbs 7:3 where he is told to “write them upon the table of thine heart.”

Memorization Strengthens us Spiritually

Memorization of God’s Word is one of the spiritual disciplines that produces spiritual growth in the life of believers. In Matthew 4 Jesus was able to defeat Satan’s temptations by quoting Scripture passages he had memorized. Each time a temptation was placed in his path he was able to respond with, “It is written,” and then quoted the appropriate verse. Memorizing Scripture, committing it to memory, helps you grow spiritually and will keep you from sin (Psalm 119:11). Memorizing, however, requires discipline, effort, and repetition.

How to Memorize Scripture

Begin by picking a verse that speaks to you. Read the verse aloud several times and then write it out. Always include the reference before and after the verse since this is often the most difficult part to
remember. Break the verse down into its natural phrases, and memorize it section by section. Emphasize key words as you quote the verse.

Write it down on a piece of paper and erase one word at a time. Each time your erase a word, try to repeat the verse filling in the word from memory. Put the verse on a flash card you keep in your pocket or purse. Display your verses in prominent places. Set them on the window sill in front of the kitchen sink or tape it to the mirror in the bathroom where you will see it often. Carry some review cards with you at all times. Always memorize the verse word perfect.

You may want to get a partner so you can encourage each other. Start out by memorizing two verses per week. Add new ones as you go along, but review all your verses each week. You must use them or you will lose them. The three keys to memorizing Scripture are: review, review, review.

5th Routine: MEDITATE on the Word of God

Psalm 1:2 tells us that the person who wants to be blessed of God “delights in the law of the Lord; and in his law doth he MEDITATE day and night.”

Joshua 1:8 says:

"This book of the law shall not depart out of thy mouth; but thou shall MEDITATE therein day and night, that thou mayest observe to do according to all that is written therein; for then thou shalt make thy way PROSPEROUS, and then thou shalt have good SUCCESS."

Focused Thinking

Meditation is simply focused thinking. Its mulling things over, reviewing them again and again in your mind. If you can worry, you can meditate. Worrying is nothing more than negative meditation. Just as a cow chews her cud by regurgitating the grass she has eaten, so the believer meditates by bringing back to mind the things he has heard and read in God’s Word. He then mulls them over in his mind thinking about what the passages say and how those verses apply to him personally.

Take Time to Think about Scripture

In Philippians 4:8 we are told to “think” (to dwell upon, to be preoccupied with, to meditate) on those things that are true, honest, just, pure, lovely, of good report, virtuous, and praise worthy. What you spend your time thinking about determines who you are and what you will become. Proverbs 23:6 says: “For as he thinketh in his heart, so is he.”

You meditate by recalling a passage of Scripture or some biblical truth to mind, and then examining it from every conceivable angle. Personalize it by inserting your name into the verse. Paraphrase it in your own words. Emphasize different words as you repeat it to yourself. Write it out in your own words. Thinking on the Word of God enables you to draw out every drop of spiritual nutrition from each tidbit of Scripture. Thinking biblically helps you to grow spiritually.
6th Routine: APPLY the Word of God

Personal application is the real secret of nourishing yourself and growing spiritually. In John 13:17 Jesus said: “If ye know these things, happy are ye if ye DO them.” Most Christians know a lot more than they practice. They know what God wants them to do, but they don’t do it. This hinders their spiritual growth.

**Put It into Practice**

Jesus’ command was to teach new believers to “OBSERVE all things whatsoever I have commanded you” (Matthew 28:20). In modern culture, the word “observe” means to watch or to casually look at something from a distance such as watching a ball game. But in Jesus’ day the word “observe” meant to do, to practice or to implement whatever one had been told. It carried the idea of participation.

We have no right to call ourselves Christians if we do not do what Jesus said. In Luke 6:46 he said: “Why call ye me, Lord, Lord, and do not the things which I say?”

**Be A Doer rather than a Hearer**

God wants us to be DOERS of the Word and not just hearers. In James 1:22 we read: “But be ye doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving your own selves.” Jesus said in Matthew 5:19: “But whosoever shall DO and teach them, the same shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven.”

As you read, study, and hear the Word of God taught, ask yourself, “How does this apply to me? What does God want me to change? How can I implement this in my life?” Then go and do it.

This last step is the hardest step, but if you practice it regularly it will become a habit that will change your life. Remember, habits are simply disciplined routines that we have practiced over and over until they become automatic responses. They are skills that enable us to grow spiritually and to become more like Christ as we PURSUE GOD.
Lesson # 4

Growing in Grace involves Communion with God

The Habit of Daily Prayer
Mark 1:35

We are talking about the SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES that enable us to grow spiritually into mature followers of Christ. In First Timothy 4:7 we are admonished to “EXERCISE thyself rather unto godliness.” Paul is telling us to develop disciplined routines, the habits, that will produce godliness in our lives.

James 1:25 tells us that “whoso looketh into the perfect law of liberty, and CONTINUETH therein . . . shall be blessed in his deed.”

To “continue” in something is to do it over and over. It is to develop the practice or the HABIT of doing the same thing again and again. James is saying, “If you want to be blessed of God, if you want to grow spiritually, then develop the HABIT of looking into the Word of God (the perfect law of liberty).”

Someone has said that the second half of our lives is made up of the habits we acquire during the first half of our lives. One of the secrets of becoming a spiritually mature Christian is learning to establish habits that promote spiritual growth. Human beings are creatures of habit. If we don't go out of our way to develop good habits we will often develop bad ones instead.

Our habits influence the three major areas of our lives: time, money, and relationships. No relationship is more important than your relationship with God. Last week, we said that if we are to grow spiritually we must develop the habit of PURSUING GOD as we nourish ourselves spiritually by hearing, reading, studying, memorizing, meditating upon, and applying the Word of God to our lives.

Today, we want to look at an equally important habit to develop - the habit of daily PRAYER as we commune with God. As with all relationships, communication plays a vital role in developing healthy, growing, vibrant interaction between two people, namely you and God.

Man was CREATED to have Communion with God

In Genesis 1:27 we are told God created man in his own image. That image is seen in a number of ways: Man has self-awareness, he is conscious of himself and his surroundings. Man has intellect, he can think, speak, and communicate. Man has volition, he has a will, and is able to choose and make decisions. Man is a moral being, he instinctively knows right and wrong. Man has a capacity for God that leaves him empty and unfulfilled until God enters the void in his life. These qualities are all reflections of God’s image stamped upon our personhood. They make it possible for us to have communion with God.

A God of Communication

God is a god of communication. He is self-revealing. He makes himself known through his creation,
through the words he speaks, through his written Word, and through the Lord Jesus Christ. Romans 1:20 tells us God speaks through his creation when it says:

“The invisible things of him from the creation of the world are CLEARLY SEEN, being understood by the THINGS THAT ARE MADE, even his eternal power and Godhead.”

Hebrews 1:1 declares God spoke through his prophets, men who served as the messengers of God. It says:

“God, who at sundry times and in divers manners SPAKE in time past unto the fathers by the prophets.”

The very next verse (Hebrews 1:2) says God:

“Hath in these last days SPOKEN unto us by his Son, whom he hath appointed heir of all things, by whom also he made the worlds.”

There are at least 1,983 times in Scripture when we read that “God said” or the “Lord said.” God is a god of communication.

**Communion with God**

Man, as originally created, enjoyed daily communion with God. As early as Genesis 2:16 we find God speaking with man and telling him how to live, and what to do so as to enjoy life to the fullest. In Genesis 3:8 we find God walking through the garden in the cool of the day seeking communion with mankind as he calls out, “Adam, where art thou?”

Until sin entered the picture, man enjoyed sweet fellowship and communion with God on a daily basis. He cherished that time alone with God. Sin, however, breaks our fellowship with God and creates a barrier between us and God. It disrupts our communion with him. Habakkuk 1:13 says of God:

“Thou art of purer eyes than to behold evil, and canst not look on iniquity.”

Isaiah 59:2 tells us:

“But your iniquities have separated between you and your God, and your sins have hid his face from you, that he will not hear.”

Christ, however, died for our sins so fellowship and communion with God is possible again. First Corinthians 1:9 tells us we have been “called unto the fellowship of his Son Jesus Christ our Lord.”

**Men who Communed with God**

Great men of God like Abraham (Genesis 12:1; 15:1), Moses (Exodus 3:4; 6:1), David (I Samuel 23:2,4), Daniel (Daniel 6:10), Paul (Acts 18:9; I Thessalonians 1:2), and others met with God repeatedly for guidance, encouragement, and strength. The Lord Jesus set the example for all of us. He communed with God on a regular basis.

Mark 1:35 tells us:
“In the morning, rising up a great while before day, he went out, and departed into a solitary place, and there prayed.”

In Luke 22:39,41 we read:

“And he came out, and went, as HE WAS WONT to the mount of Olives . . . and kneeled down, and prayed.”

What do the words “as he was wont” mean? They could be translated, “as was his custom” or “as was his habit.” Jesus made a habit of communing with his heavenly Father on a regular basis. You cannot grow spiritually unless you develop the habit of communing with God on a daily basis.

Notice communion with God involved speaking or conversing with God in prayer. Prayer is nothing more than talking with God. It is telling God what is on your heart and asking him to help you with the situations you face in life. It is normal. It is natural. It is what we were created to do and is one of the keys to growing spiritually.

**Man CRAVES to have Communion with God**

There are at least seven times when we should seek to commune with God:

*We should seek daily communion with God as we give him the DEVOTION he deserves.*

God is a great God. He is our Creator. He is holy, righteous, just, pure, all wise, all knowing, and all powerful. He deserves our devotion, our worship, and our loyalty. Psalm 29:1,2 says:

“Give unto the Lord, O ye mighty, give unto the Lord glory and strength. Give unto the Lord the glory DUE unto his name; worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness.”

Only God and the Lord Jesus are worthy of our heart’s devotion (Revelation 4:10,11).

*We should seek daily communion with God before we make important DECISIONS.*

In Luke 6:13 we are told Jesus “called unto him his disciples; and of them he CHOSE twelve, whom also he named apostles.”

Look at what he did in the previous verse BEFORE he made the decision concerning which followers would be his closest disciples. It says “he went out into a mountain to PRAY, and continued all night in PRAYER to God.” Jesus spent a protracted period of time communing with God, seeking God’s will in the choices he was about to make. If Jesus needed to do that when making decisions, how much more do we need to do the same?

*We should seek daily communion with God for DIRECTION in life.*

Psalm 25:4 says: “Shew me thy ways, O Lord: teach me thy paths.” When Nehemiah was asked by the king why he was so sad he quickly prayed and asked the Lord for direction in how to respond (Nehemiah 2:4).

Proverbs 3:6 tells us: “In all thy ways acknowledge him, and he shall DIRECT thy paths” and Psalm
31:3 states: “Therefore for thy name’s sake LEAD me, and GUIDE me.”

At the beginning of every day we should commune with God and ask him to direct us throughout the day. In the words of the Apostle Paul we should cry out to him and say, “Lord, what wilt thou have me to do?” (Acts 9:6).

We should seek daily communion with God when we are DISCOURAGED.

Life is tough. There are setbacks along the way. Things don’t always turn out as we expect. It is easy to become discouraged, to lose heart, and to be overwhelmed by life. Psalm 42:5 says:

“Why art thou cast down, O my soul? And why art thou disquieted in me? Hope thou in God; for I shall yet praise him for the help of his countenance.”

In Psalm 73:2 Asaph was in despair as he thought about the prosperity of the wicked as compared to the trials of the godly man. He said his “steps had well nigh slipped.” When he thought on these things he found it was “too painful” for him “UNTIL I went into the sanctuary of God; then understood I their end” (vs. 17). When he communed with God his discouragement and despair were lifted.

We should seek daily communion with God when we are facing DANGER.

The Assyrian army was at the gates of Jerusalem. The situation looked hopeless. The city was in danger of falling to the enemy. The Assyrian king had written a letter demanding the surrender of the city and sent it to King Hezekiah. Second Kings 19:14 tells us “Hezekiah went up into the house of the Lord, and spread it before the Lord.” In time of danger he sought out the Lord and communed with him about his predicament.

We should seek daily communion with God when we are DEFILED by sin and need cleansing.

David had sinned grievously against God in committing adultery with Bathsheba. He had murdered her husband. The guilt of his sin was overwhelming. He couldn’t sleep. He couldn’t eat. His heart was in turmoil. In Psalm 51 he turned to God, poured out his heart to him, confessed his wrongdoing, and sought forgiveness and cleansing for his sin. While sin breaks our communion with God, confession makes it whole again.

We should seek daily communion with God when we are reporting for DUTY.

Jesus was a busy man. People were constantly coming and going. They had illnesses that needed healing. They had problems that needed solving. They had questions that needed answering. Jesus was a busy man, but in Mark 6:31 he told his disciples:

“Come ye yourselves apart into a desert place and rest a while; for there were many coming and going, and they had no leisure so much as to eat.”

In the midst of all this ministry activity Luke 5:16 tells us that “he withdrew himself into the wilderness, and prayed.” He sought time alone with God to commune with him. Mark 1:34,35 reinforces that. Even in the midst of a busy ministry schedule Jesus took time out to commune with God in prayer. If Jesus needed to do that, how much more do we need to develop the habit of communing with God?
Man’s CONDUCT when having Communion with God

There are a number of things you can do that will make your time with God more profitable and a greater blessing to you.

Establish a regular time for communion with God

First, have a regular time and place for communing with God. Jesus and many biblical saints sought communion with God early in the morning at the start of their day (Mark 1:35). They wanted to give God their best when their minds were fresh, their hearts were clean and tender, and the cares of the day were not yet pressing in upon them. Jesus sought a solitary place where he could be alone with God and uninterrupted (Mark 1:35). So, choose a place where you can be alone with God early in the morning, perhaps on the porch, in the living room or in your study.

Have the Right Attitude

Second, get your attitude right so you are ready to commune with God. Come with a reverent heart when you enter into the presence of God and quiet your soul before him. Psalm 46:10 says: “Be still, and know that I am God.” Come with an expectant heart. Look forward to your time of communion with God. Psalm 119:18 reads: “Open thou mine eyes, that I may behold wondrous things out of thy law.” Come with an obedient heart. Psalm 40:8 states: “I delight to do thy will, O my God: yea, thy law is within my heart.”

Have a Plan

Third, structure your time with God. Have a plan. After quieting my heart before God, I like to begin my time by simply thinking about God and picturing him as my loving Father. Rather than simply dumping my list of demands on the table, I like to use the A-C-T-S acrostic to structure my time with God.

A - Adoration and Worship directed to God.
C - Confession of any known sins.
T - Thanksgiving and Praise for all his blessings to me.
S - Supplications and Requests I share with God.

After talking with God for a while I will then read a chapter in my Bible and pick out a different verse every day about which to journal. This doesn’t have to be long. I usually write two to three paragraphs concerning the verse and what it means to me personally.

Make a List

Fourth, develop a list of prayer requests. Consider taking four sheets of paper (one for each week of the month) and dividing each sheet into seven columns (one for each day). That gives you twenty-eight days in which to list different requests. Pray about different things on different days. You might list some things (such as family members) on every day, others might appear once a week, and still others once a month. You can add new requests as you go along and remove items after God answers that particular need. This will keep you from falling into “vain repetition” and mindless praying (Matthew 6:7).

Write Out your Prayer

Fifth, you may want to write out your prayers and then read them to God. This is especially helpful if you
are a new believer and are not accustomed to communing with God. It will force you to think and will make your prayers much more cohesive and understandable both to you and to God.

**Keep a Journal**

Sixth, keep a journal of your communion with God. Nothing becomes dynamic until it becomes specific, and nothing becomes specific until it comes out of the point of a pencil. Writing clarifies our thinking. It forces us to be concise. It gives us a record of what we have asked God for, how God has answered, and what he has taught us during our time with him. I don’t journal so much about my prayers as I do about what I read in God’s Word. Others prefer to keep a prayer journal. Both are fine.

**Pray Habitually**

Communion with God is a habit, a spiritual discipline believers must build into their lives if they are to grow in grace and become spiritually mature followers of Christ. As with all habits and disciplines it takes time, effort, and consistency, but it pays huge dividends that make it all worth while. In speaking concerning the Sanhedrin Council Acts 4:13 makes this observation. It says:

> "When they saw the boldness of Peter and John, and perceived that they were unlearned and ignorant men, they marveled; and they took knowledge of them that they HAD BEEN WITH JESUS."

Could the same thing be said of you and me? It can if you develop the habit of communing with God on a daily basis.
Lesson # 5

Growing in Grace involves Spending Time with God’s People

The Habit of Partnering
Acts 2:42

When I grew up in a small country church in upstate New York the people had a practice that has been largely lost in the church today. They called each other "BROTHER" and "SISTER." It was always "Brother Ken" or "Sister Palmitier." The Sunday School superintendent was "Brother Lawrence" and the pianist was "Sister Thelma." You seldom hear believers refer to each other as "brother" and "sister" any more, and yet that is one of the most important concepts taught in the Bible.

The church is not merely an organization. It's not just a group of people who congregate on Sunday mornings. It is much more than that. The Bible uses a number of metaphors to describe the church. It is referred to as a body (I Corinthians 12:27-28), a building (Ephesians 2:20-22), a bride (Revelation 21:9), a flock (Acts 20:28), and most importantly, as a family (Ephesians 3:15). That terminology is critically important to understanding one of the habits, one of the spiritual disciplines we need to develop in our lives if we are to grow to spiritual maturity and to become more like Jesus Christ.

Growing in grace involves developing those spiritual disciplines that enable us to change and to function as mature followers of the Savior. We have looked at two of those habits so far: the habit of PURSUING GOD by nourishing yourself spiritually in his Word, and the habit of daily PRAYER as we commune with God regularly. The first involves learning to LISTEN to God as he speaks through his Word while the second involves learning to TALK with God through prayer.

The third spiritual discipline we need in order to grow spiritually is the habit of spending time with God’s people. We might call it the habit of PARTNERING with God’s family. God never intended for Christians to live in isolation from one another. We are not independent contractors who are unrelated to each other. Rather, we are brothers and sisters with a common family bond that draws us together so we can help each other in our journey together toward Christ-likeness.

There are four aspects to this spiritual discipline, this habit of partnering with God’s people.

As believers, we have something in COMMON

In Acts 2:42 we are told the early believers “continued steadfastly.” They disciplined themselves to do four things:

1) They developed the habit of listening to the “apostles’ doctrine” together;
2) They developed the habit of fellowshipping together;
3) They developed the habit of breaking bread together;
4) They developed the habit of talking with God together.
We have already looked at the first and fourth habits of listening to God as he speaks through his Word, and talking with God through prayer. It is this second habit of “fellowshipping” (partnering) together that we want to look at in this lesson. What does it involve? How does it affect me as a believer? What does it have to do with growing spiritually?

The word “fellowship” is found sixteen times in the Bible, twice in the Old Testament and fourteen times in the New Testament. It comes from the Greek word “koinonia” which means to participate, to be in partnership with, to share something in common or to have something in common. We tend to associate “fellowship” with food, church suppers and getting together in each other’s homes for a good time. That is certainly included in the biblical concept of “fellowship,” but the scriptural idea is much larger than that.

**A Common Commitment to the Savior**

“Fellowship” focuses on the things we have in common as followers of Christ. First of all, we are committed to the same SAVIOR. We have placed our faith and trust in Jesus Christ and his finished work on the cross of Calvary for our salvation. We acknowledge him as God. We see him as our Lord and Master. We have committed our lives to living in obedience to him. There is a common bond that is formed when people become born-again Christians. It centers around the person of Jesus Christ as our Savior.

**A Common Commitment to the Scriptures**

Second, we are committed to the SCRIPTURES as the Word of God. We accept the Bible as God’s inspired, inerrant, all-sufficient Word. We see it as God’s revelation to mankind telling us what God is like and how we can be in right relationship with him. It is here that we learn how God would have us to live. We have a common commitment to the Scriptures being the Word of God, and as such it is our final authority in faith and practice.

**A Common Commitment to Serving**

Third, we are committed to SERVING one another. Fellowship is always pro-active. It looks for opportunities to serve others. It is motivated both by the example of the Lord Jesus and by the love which he sheds abroad in our hearts. There are more than fifty “one another” commands in the Bible, things that we are to do to help each other become the person God wants us to be.

**A Common Commitment to the Sanctuary.**

Fourth, we are committed to the same SANCTUARY. The believers in Acts 2:42 all belonged to the same church - the church of Jerusalem. As believers we are to seek out a local church where we can find fellowship with other believers, hear the Word of God taught, and have opportunity to serve in ministry. As members of the same local church we share a common bond together.

So, as believers we have a number of things in common that bind our hearts together in love for each other regardless of race, culture or language. But there is more as we unpack each of these in greater detail.
As believers, we belong to the same FAMILY

When a person by faith receives Jesus Christ as his/her personal Savior, that person is born into the family of God. He becomes a child of God. John 1:12 tells us:

“But as many as received him (Christ), to them gave he power to become the SONS (children) OF GOD, even to them that believe on his name."

Galatians 6:10 says:

“As we have therefore opportunity, let us do good unto all men, ESPECIALLY unto them who are of the HOUSEHOLD (family) of faith.”

In Romans 12:5 we read:

“So we, being many, are one body in Christ, and every one MEMBERS ONE OF ANOTHER.”

And in Matthew 12:50 Jesus said:

"Whosoever shall do the will of my Father which is in heaven, the same is MY BROTHER and SISTER."

Think about it. Jesus claims YOU and ME as his brothers or sisters.

Someone has observed that in relationship to believers, the term "brother" is used at least 54 times and the word "sister" appears 6 times, but the word "brethren" appears no less than 180 times (see Acts 9:17; 21:20; 22:13; I Corinthians 16:12; Ephesians 6:21; Philippians 2:25). If God is YOUR heavenly Father, and if God is MY heavenly Father, then we are brothers and sisters in Christ. Whether we like it or not, we are related to each other, and to every other believer in the world.

No believer can claim independence for himself. No Christian can rightfully say, “I don’t need you. I can get along just fine by myself without you.” That attitude is an unbiblical attitude. It flies in the face of what God says and in reality is nothing more than rebellion against God. First Corinthians 6:19 tells us we are not our own. We belong to Jesus Christ because he purchased us with his own blood. The truth is, we DO need each other because we are all members of the same family.

As believers, we are to SERVE one another

In First Peter 4:10 we are told:

"As every man hath received the gift, even so MINISTER (serve) THE SAME ONE TO ANOTHER as good stewards of the manifold grace of God."

You are Gifted

You are a gifted person. God has gifted you for ministry. According to Romans 12:6 and First Corinthians 12:7 God has given you one or more gifts of his grace (spiritual gifts) which he wants you to use for the benefit of your fellow believers.
I am obligated to God and to other followers of Christ to use the spiritual gifts he has given in the way and for the purpose he intended for me to use them (I Peter 4:10). It is wrong to not use them at all or to use them just for myself or my own family. The motto of every believer ought to be "SERVICE!" rather than "SERVE US."

**God has Equipped You**

God has equipped you and placed you in the Body of Christ for the purpose of serving other people and ministering to their needs as you come into contact with them. They have hurts which your spiritual gift can meet if you exercise it properly. You have an obligation to use the gifts God gives you to help those around you.

First Corinthians 12:25-27 teaches there is an interdependent and reciprocal relationship that exists between the members of the Body of Christ. As you exercise your gift in service to others you grow spiritually. As they exercise their gift in service to you, they grow spiritually. Everyone benefits.

**One Another Ministry**

Here is a partial list of "one another" obligations believers have to each other:

- We are to serve one another. (Galatians 5:13)
- We are to accept one another. (Romans 15:7)
- We are to forgive one another. (Colossians 3:13)
- We are to greet one another. (Romans 16:6)
- We are to bear one another's burdens. (Galatians 6:2)
- We are to be devoted to one another. (Romans 12:10)
- We are to honor one another. (Romans 12:10)
- We are to teach one another. (Romans 15:14)
- We are to submit to one another. (Ephesians 5:21)
- We are to encourage one another. (1 Thessalonians 5:11)
- We are to love one another. (John 15:12)
- We are to admonish one another. (Romans 15:14)
- We are to comfort one another. (1 Thessalonians 4:18)
- We are not to judge one another. (Romans 14:13)

Altogether, there are at least fifty-eight times when this "one another" concept is mentioned in the New Testament. The Bible places tremendous emphasis on the importance of believers coming together and ministering to each other. You cannot grow spiritually, you cannot become spiritually mature without that interaction between believers. We all need to be givers and receivers of ministry. We need the ministry of other believers in our lives and they need our ministry in their lives.

**We are a Team**

It is not only as we serve one another that we grow spiritually, but it is as we serve WITH one another that we grow. Ministry and service in Scripture was almost always a TEAM effort. It involved several believers combining their skills, talents, gifts, and efforts to achieve a common goal. Moses had Joshua. Elijah had Elisha. Jesus had the Twelve. Barnabas had Saul. Paul had Timothy, etc. Two working together can accomplish more than if they work separately.

Listen to Ecclesiastes 4:9 where it says:
"Two are BETTER than one; because they have a good reward for their labor."

Look for opportunities to serve together by team teaching a class, going out on visitation together, singing in the choir together, ushering together or running the sound equipment together. The camaraderie of serving together provides you with a great opportunity for sweet fellowship and sharing ministry with one another.

Believers have so much in common. They are part of the same family. They are part of a gifted, interdependent, mutually beneficial relationship that helps them mature spiritually as they become more like the Lord Jesus.

As believers, we are to WORSHIP together

God expects every believer to unite with and become a member of a Bible-believing, local New Testament church. If you look again at Acts 2:41 you will find that those who believed Peter’s gospel message on the Day of Pentecost, those who accepted his message of salvation and put their faith and trust in Christ “were baptized, and the same day there were ADDED UNTO THEM about three thousand souls.”

To whom or to what were they added? They were added unto “THEM,” the existent group of believers who comprised the church in Jerusalem. Verse 47 makes this clear when it says: “And the Lord ADDED to the CHURCH daily such as should be (or were being) saved.” As soon as they were saved they began developing the habits and spiritual disciplines that would help them to grow to spiritual maturity.

Verse forty-two says they “continued stedfastly in the apostle’s doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers.” They came together for worship and fellowship, the sharing of that which they had in common. They found fellowship in worshipping together.

There are four major benefits derived from worshipping together and being a member of a local congregation of believers.

Worshipping together provides me with the promise of the Lord’s PRESENCE as I grow spiritually.

In Matthew 18:20 Jesus said: "Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them." Jesus is there when believers congregate. That can be a regular Sunday church service, a Wednesday Bible study or two or three Christians getting together for fellowship and to share with each other. The Savior loves to be with his people when they get together.

While it is true that Jesus promises never to forsake us nor to leave us as individuals (Hebrews 13:5), it is also equally true that Jesus promised his presence would be with us in a special way when we meet together with other believers. Jesus always shows up at those places where believers are meeting together. The question is, do we?

Worshipping together provides me with the ENCOURAGEMENT to grow spiritually.

Hebrews 10:24,25 says:
“And let us CONSIDER ONE ANOTHER to PROVOKE UNTO LOVE and to good works; Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is; but EXHORTING one another.”

This verse is often understood as an injunction not to skip church, but the main purpose for being present is often missed. The reason for worshipping together, for coming together in worship is out of consideration for each other. It is for the benefit of the OTHER believers who will be there. We are to “provoke” (stimulate, encourage) one another to LOVE God, and to SERVE him as well as each other.

We are to “exhort” (urge, encourage) one another to develop the habits that will help us grow to spiritual maturity. Healthy spiritual growth requires interaction with other believers. You cannot grow in a vacuum nor in isolation.

Others are encouraged by our mere presence. No one likes to go to a church with just a handful of people present. The larger the number of people who are present, the more others are encouraged to attend as well. Crowds attract crowds. People are drawn to churches that are growing.

**Worshipping together provides me with the ACCOUNTABILITY needed to grow spiritually.**

In Genesis 4:9 Cain asked the question, “Am I my brother’s keeper?” The answer to that is YES! Believers are responsible for helping each other grow in grace by holding them accountable for what they do and how they behave.

Proverbs 27:17 says:

“Iron sharpeneth iron; so a man sharpeneth the countenance of his friend.”

Hebrews 13:3 tells us:

“But exhort (encourage) one another daily, while it is called today, lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin.”

Galatians 6:1,2 reminds us that if a brother is overtaken in a “fault” (sin), those who are spiritual are to help restore him and get him back to where he is living for the Lord once again.

As a believer I am to make myself accountable to other believers while at the same time holding them accountable for their walk with God. There is a mutual interdependency that exists between believers. We need each other to keep from falling, and to pick us up when we do fall.

**Worshipping together provides me with a powerful WITNESS as I grow spiritually.**

In his high priestly prayer in John 17:21 Jesus prayed for his followers:

“That they all may be one; as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be one in us; that the WORLD MAY BELIEVE that thou has sent me.”

In John 13:35 Jesus said:

“By this shall ALL MEN know that ye are my disciples, if ye have LOVE one for another.”
It is not what we SAY that impresses the world. It is what we DO that counts. When the world sees believers united and fellowshipping together, caring and sharing with one another, they conclude Christ is real and that he really does make a difference in people's lives.

If you want to grow spiritually and become more like Christ, then develop the PARTNERSHIP habit of spending time with God’s people on a regular basis. You’ll be glad you did, and so will others.
Lesson # 6

Growing in Grace involves Sharing Your Faith

The Habit of Presenting
Acts 2:42

We are talking about “growing in grace” and the habits we need to develop in our lives if we are to become spiritually mature followers of Christ. The Word of God admonishes us to “exercise thyself rather unto godliness” (I Timothy 4:7). We are to work at developing those spiritual disciplines in our lives that build spiritual muscle so we can function like the mature believers God intends for us to be.

Spiritual maturity is not measured by one’s learning or longevity, but by one’s lifestyle. It is what we DO that demonstrates what we ARE. Mature believers develop certain habits that enable them to grow. We have looked at three of those habits thus far:

• The habit of PURSUING God by nourishing ourselves spiritually and learning to listen to what he says in his Word, the Bible.

• The habit of PRAYER through communing with God and learning to talk with him.

• The habit of PARTNERING with God’s people by spending time with them and learning to fellowship with other believers.

Today, we come to the fourth spiritual routine we need to develop in our lives in order to keep growing in our walk with God. It is the routine of PRESENTING your faith to others. When you go to the gym and enroll in an exercise program they usually start you off with exercises that are fairly easy to do. As you master one routine they add new ones that tend to be more difficult than the previous ones.

You think, “I’ll never be able to do that. It’s too hard.” However, you soon discover that with a little time and effort you can handle the new routine because of the muscle you have built up in the previous exercises. The same thing is true spiritually. As you develop one habit you are able to take on new, more challenging habits and conquer them. Many people think sharing their faith with others is too demanding, too hard, too scary, too impossible. But it really isn’t if you know what to do.

So, let me walk you through it.

God’s COMPASSION for Lost People

God loves people. He is compassionate toward them. He is concerned about their well-being and their welfare. God is a God of love. First John 4:8 tells us “God is love.” Over and over in the Scriptures we read of God’s love for people.

Deuteronomy 4:37 says:
“And because he LOVED thy fathers, therefore he chose their seed after them, and brought thee out in his sight with his mighty power out of Egypt”

In Isaiah 43:4 God makes this statement:

“Since thou wast PRECIOUS in my sight, thou hast been honourable, and I have LOVED thee.”

In Jeremiah 31:3 we find God saying:

“Yea, I have LOVED thee with an everlasting LOVE; therefore with LOVINGKINDNESS have I drawn thee.”

In Matthew 9:36 we are told that when Jesus . . .

“Saw the multitudes, he was moved with COMPASSION on them, because they fainted, and were scattered abroad, as sheep having no shepherd.”

**God’s Love is Personal**

God’s love is broad. It is all-inclusive and it is personal. In John 3:16 we are told “God so loved the WORLD that he gave his only begotten Son.” In Romans 8:37 we read “God loved US” (also see Eph. 2:4). But in Galatians 2:20 I discover “God loved ME.”

People, however, are lost in sin. Jesus said they are like sheep without a shepherd (Matthew 9:36). They have wandered away and gone astray from God. They have become lost in the wilderness of sin. Psalm 119:176 says: “I have GONE ASTRAY like a lost sheep.” Isaiah 53:6 tells us: “All we like sheep have GONE ASTRAY; we have turned every one to his own way.” The Bible portrays mankind as lost, separated, isolated from God, and unable to find his way back to God.

**God wants Lost People Found**

God wants lost people found and brought back into right relationship with him. Second Peter 3:9 tells us that God “is longsuffering to us-ward, not willing that ANY should PERISH, but that ALL should come to repentance.”

Jesus said that he came “to SEEK and to SAVE that which was lost” (Luke 19:10). God is not happy with lost sheep that are not found, fruit that is not picked, fish that are not caught, grain that is not harvested or souls that are not saved. Because he is good, kind, loving, and compassionate, God wants lost people found.

**God’s COMMAND concerning Lost People**

Before he returned to heaven the Lord Jesus left instructions concerning what he wants his followers to do in relationship to lost people. In Matthew 28:19 he said:

“Go ye therefore, and TEACH all nations, baptizing them . . . and teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you”
**Making Disciples**

The word “teach” is “matheteusate” in the Greek. It means to “make disciples.” God wants us to share our faith with lost people and to seek to win them to faith in Christ so that they become disciples or followers of Christ. He makes this personal and clarifies one of the ways this can be done in Acts 1:8 when he said:

“But ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you; and ye shall be WITNESSES unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth.”

A “witness” is simply someone who tells what he has personally seen, heard, and experienced (Acts 22:15; I John 1:3; Psalm 107:2).

The Bible is filled with examples of people giving personal testimonies: David (Psalm 66:16), the woman at the well (John 4:39), the man born blind (John 9:25), Peter and John (Acts 4:20), and the apostle Paul (Acts 26:2-23).

**Your Personal Testimony**

Sharing your testimony has many advantages. It is unique. No two testimonies are alike. It is personal and easy to understand. People can relate to it. They have been in similar circumstances. People love to hear personal stories and tend to remember them. It has authority. People cannot deny nor argue against it.

There are four critical elements that should be included in your testimony:

1. **What your life was like BEFORE you were saved.**

   Relate circumstances with which unbelievers can identify. What attitudes did you have that unbelievers can relate to? What was most important to you when you were an unbeliever? What substitutes did you have for God in your life (sports, success, work, marriage, sex, money, drugs, popularity, having fun, hobbies, etc.)?

2. **How you REALIZED you needed to be saved.**

   What significant steps led up to your conversion? What needs, hurts or problems made you dissatisfied with the way you were living without God? How did God get your attention? What motivated you to come to Christ?

3. **How you COMMITTED your life to Christ.**

   What did you come to understand from Scripture about how to accept Christ as your Savior? What specifically did you do? Where did it happen? What did you say in your prayer? Be specific. Emphasize that you surrendered control of your life to Christ.

4. **The DIFFERENCE being saved has made in your life.**

   What benefits have you experienced from being saved? What problems have been resolved? How has your life changed for the better? How has it helped your relationships? Give a current example.
You want to spend the least time on part #1 (what your life was like before you were saved) and the most time on part #4 (the difference being saved has made in your life).

**Suggestions for Developing your Testimony**

Here are some suggestions for preparing your testimony. Pray and ask God to give you the right words. Then write it out on paper and ask your pastor or another mature Christian to review it for you. Ask them to make suggestions for improving it. Keep it short and to the point. It should only be ONE page long and should take no more than two to five minutes to relate.

Use “I”, “me”, and “my” instead of “you.” This is YOUR story. It is about YOU, not your listeners. Refer to experiences most people have in common. Share a slice of your life they can identify with, but don’t get tangled in meaningless details. Don’t exaggerate pre-conversion sins. Be honest about your continuing struggles. Don’t imply all your problems ended at conversion because they didn’t.

Don’t quote multiple verses. This may intimated the person to whom you are witnessing (no more than one or two verses). Emphasize why you received Christ and the benefits you received from doing so, including knowing where you will spend eternity.

Give concrete examples of the changes that have occurred in your life since you were saved. The more specific you are, the more effective you will be. Don’t make negative remarks about other religions, churches or people. Be careful about using biblical terminology which non-Christians may not understand (ex. “propitiation,” “justified,” “salvation,” “redeemed,” etc.). Practice your testimony. Rehearse it until it feels and sounds natural. Read it out loud and change it until it sounds conversational.

**How to Share your Testimony**

Once you have your testimony worked out, look for opportunities to share it with friends and co-workers. Listen for them to mention a problem or a need with which God has helped you. Then say:


> “You know, that used to be a big issue in my life too, but then I discovered something that made a major difference in my life.” (begin your testimony)

You can refer to something in the news or on TV which deals with a common need or problem.


> “Did you read about (problem). I can sure identify with how those people feel. It wasn’t that long ago I struggled with that too. But then something happened which changed everything for me.” (begin your testimony)

You can make a statement or refer to a situation with which your friend is likely to agree or to which he can relate such as the following examples:


> “It seems like life is becoming more hectic all the time. But I’ve discovered something that made a major difference in my life.” (begin your testimony)


> “Sometimes life just gets so complicated. I can sure identify with that, but something happened which changed everything for me.” (begin your testimony)


> “Life doesn’t always turn out the way we plan it. It wasn’t long ago I struggled with that, but something happened which changed everything for me.” (begin your testimony)
You can become an effective witness and soul winner for Christ by sharing your testimony with others.

**God’s COURSE for Sharing with Lost People**

It is always helpful if you have a plan in mind for presenting the gospel to people. Here is a step by step process for doing so.

**Step One - Begin by talking about natural things.** You want to put the person at ease so they are not defensive or uptight. Take five to ten minutes to talk about secular things, things of mutual interest such as the weather, work, family, sports, cars, fashions, etc.

Use either the "H-E-L-P" plan or the "F-O-R-M" plan to guide the initial conversation.

The "H-E-L-P" plan:

- **H** = house, hobbies, humidity (weather)
- **E** = employment (job)
- **L** = loved ones (children, spouse, grandchildren)
- **P** = plan of salvation

The "F-O-R-M" plan:

- **F** = family, friends
- **O** = occupation (job)
- **R** = religion (church involvement)
- **M** = message (plan of salvation)

By showing interest and asking questions about each of these areas you can guide the conversation into a witnessing opportunity.

**Step Two - Transition from talking about secular things to spiritual matters.** Simply ask, "May I ask you a personal question?" or "Let me ask you this question." Most people will consent. When they do, say:

"I've been thinking a lot about God recently and what it takes to get into heaven. Tell me, if you had to stand before God and he were to ask you, 'Why should I let you into my heaven?,’ what would you tell him?"

People are not offended by this question. Most people will readily tell you what they are trusting in to get them to heaven. Their answer will almost always tell you whether they are saved or not. Don't argue or dispute their answer. Simply ask:

"May I take just a couple of minutes to show you what God says we have to do to get into heaven?"

If the person doesn't grant permission for you to share the plan of salvation with him, don't press the matter. Briefly share your testimony. If the person does agree for you to share the plan of salvation, then move to Step Three below.
Step Three - Point out that we are all sinners. “The Bible tells us in Romans 3:2 (point to the verse so he can see it and read it slowly to him):

“For all have SINNED, and come short of the glory of God.”

"Sin" involves missing the mark, falling SHORT of the standard God has set for us. Apply the verse to yourself and then to the person you are witnessing to.

Step Four - Point out the penalty of sin. “In Romans 6:23 we find the consequence, the result of our sin is when God says . . .” (point to the verse so he can see it and read it slowly to him)

“For the WAGES of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.”

"Wages" refers to something we earn, something we deserve, something we receive in response to what we have done. God says that the "wages of sin is death," eternal separation from God forever in a place called "hell." Because we have sinned, because we have failed to live up to God's standard, God says we must pay the penalty of being separated from him forever and ever.

Step Five - Point out that God loves them and Christ died for them. “The Bible tells us that in spite of our sin God loves us, and sent his son, Jesus Christ, to pay the penalty for our sins and to die in our place. Romans 5:8 says . . .” (point to the verse so he can see it and read it slowly to him)

“But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ DIED for us.”

God knew there was no way we could ever measure up to his standard and so he sent his own perfect Son to suffer the penalty we so richly deserve. He became our substitute and paid the penalty for us.

Step Six - Point out that salvation is a free gift from God. “In Romans 6:23 God says . . . “ (point to the verse so he can see it and read it slowly to him) Notice that "eternal life" (salvation) is the "gift of God."

“For the wages of sin is death; but the GIFT of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.”

A "gift" is something of value which costs the recipient nothing, but which may have cost the giver a great deal. Salvation is free to you and me, but it cost Jesus Christ his life. God offers salvation to us as a free gift. That's the only way it could be made available to every person.

Step Seven - Point out that they must trust Christ to be saved. When someone holds out a present to you and says, "Here, this is for you. I want you to have it," what do you have to do to get it? Simply reach out and take it. Right? John 1:12 tells us:

“But as many as RECEIVED him, them gave he power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name.”

To receive God's gift of salvation, you must:

Acknowledge or confess your sin to God. (I John 1:9)
Put your faith and trust in Christ who died for your sins.
Commit your life to God by receiving Christ as your personal Lord and Savior.
Step Eight - Ask the person to make a decision for Christ. "Mr. Jones, would you like to put your faith in Jesus Christ, and ask him to come into your life right now and save you?" If the person responds positively, ask him/her to bow his head and to pray something like this:

"Lord, I confess I am a poor lost sinner who needs saving."

"I believe you sent your Son, the Lord Jesus, to die on the cross to pay for my sins and that you are willing to save me."

"I hereby commit my life to you and receive Jesus Christ into my life as my Lord and Savior."

"I ask you to forgive my sins and save me for Jesus' sake. . . . Amen."

Congratulations! You have just won a soul to Christ. The thrill of leading someone to Christ is one of the greatest privileges in the Christian life. We grow in grace as we develop the habit of PRESENTING our faith to others who do not know Christ. It is a habit you want to build into your life as a believer.
Lesson # 7

Growing in Grace involves Sharing Your Resources

The Habit of Portioning

We are learning to “GROW IN GRACE” by developing the spiritual disciplines that produce spiritual maturity in our lives. Growth is seldom accidental. It tends to be INTENTIONAL. We grow because we develop the habits that promote growth.

Thus far, we have looked at the habit of PURSUING God by nourishing ourselves spiritually as we hear, read, study, memorize, meditate, and apply the Word of God to our lives. We also looked at the habit of PRAYING to God on a daily basis by coming into his presence and simply spending time talking with him and sharing our hopes, dreams, burdens, and concerns with him.

The third habit we examined was the habit of PARTNERING with God’s people and spending time with them and serving one another simply because we have so much in common with each other. We are members of the same family, namely, God’s family. We need the accountability this provides.

The fourth habit we considered was the habit of PRESENTING our faith to those who do not know Christ as Savior. Someone shared the Good News with us so we might have our sins forgiven and be saved. We have the same responsibility to share our testimonies with others who need a personal relationship with God.

Have you noticed that each of these habits that stimulates spiritual growth is getting a little bit harder as we go along? Exercise is like that, isn’t it? You start out with the easy exercises first and gradually move up to the more strenuous, and demanding routines. As you do that you develop muscle, both physically and spiritually. That’s why Paul says in First Timothy 4:7: “Exercise thyself rather unto godliness.” In other words, do the hard work of growing spiritually.

The habit we want to look at today is a little harder, a little more demanding, and requires us to trust God a bit more than we have before. It is the habit of sharing a PORTION of our resources with God and others. It focuses on how we use the things we possess.

The PRINCIPLES involved in Sharing our Resources with others

The Principle of Ownership

Who owns the things we possess? People think that’s easy enough to answer. They assume THEY own the things they possess. After all, possession is nine-tenths of the law, isn’t it? Not necessarily. A thief may possess something he stole, but it doesn’t belong to him. It is not his even though he possesses it. And what about that house you live in and that car you drive? Do you really own them or does the mortgage company hold the title to them? How about that banker who has millions of dollars in deposits? Do those funds really belong to him even though he has possession of them? Not really. Possession does not necessarily imply ownership.
Someone says: “Yes, but I earned the money with which to purchase these things. Therefore, they belong to me. I own them.” Tell that to the zoning board when you want to build something on your empty lot. You’ll find out that you are only a temporary tenant on that property. You don’t own it at all. They are just letting you occupy it for a little while. Moreover, Deuteronomy 8:17,18 reminds us that it is God who gives us the ability to work and to earn income when it says:

"And thou say in thine heart, My power and the might of mine hand hath gotten me this wealth. But thou shalt remember the Lord thy God; for it is HE that giveth thee power to get wealth."

You wouldn’t have a job or be able to work if it weren’t for God giving you that job and the ability to do it.

Here is the real clincher, God says that HE owns, not only the things we possess, but everything that exists. Listen to what he says:

"The earth is the LORD'S, and the fulness thereof; the world, and they that dwell therein." (Psalm 24:1)

"The silver is MINE, and the gold is MINE, saith the Lord of hosts." (Haggai 2:8)

"For every beast of the forest is MINE, and the cattle upon a thousand hills . . . and the wild beasts of the field are MINE." (Psalm 50:10,11)

In Matthew 25:14 God is described as a "man traveling into a far country, who called his own servants, and delivered unto them HIS goods."

He didn't give them what belonged to them. He gave them what belonged to HIM. First Corinthians 4:7 reinforces this concept when it says:

“For who maketh thee to differ from another? And what hast thou that thou didst not receive? Now if thou didst receive it, why dost thou glory, as if thou hadst not received it? ”

King David recognized the principle of God’s ownership in First Chronicles 29:14 when he said:

“But who am I, and what is my people, that we should be able to offer so willingly after this sort? For ALL THINGS COME OF THEE, and of THINE OWN have we given thee.”

So, the first principle in learning to share our resources with others is to recognize that everything we possess belongs to God, came from God, and one day will return to God.

The Principle of Stewardship

How are we to use the things we possess? God is interested in how we secure our money, how we spend it, how we share it, and how we save it. God has entrusted us with HIS resources. He has given us the position of “stewards” while here on earth. The words "steward", "stewards", and "stewardship" are found twenty-two times in the Bible.

A "steward" is a financial manager, someone who handles, invests, oversees or manages the assets of another person. Your banker is a "steward" of your money. The church treasurer is the "steward" of the church funds, and you and I are the "stewards" of God's resources. God uses money and resources to accomplish two things in our lives:
First, God uses money to strengthen our TRUST in him. In Matthew 6:31-33 Jesus said we are to put God and the things of God first in our lives including this area of finances. We are to give God priority over everything else in life. If we do that, God then promises to provide for all of our needs such as food, clothing, shelter, possessions, etc. He is trying to teach us to trust him, to take him at his Word.

Second, God uses money to develop our TRUSTWORTHINESS. A "steward" manages other people's money and resources. He uses those resources in the manner prescribed by the owner. God gives us a limited amount of money and possessions to see how we use them. If we use them properly he often gives us more (Luke 19:17). If we use them improperly he may limit the amount he gives us (Luke 16:11).

A good steward remembers three things: 1) God can take whatever he wants, whenever he wants because it all belongs to him. 2) All spending decisions are spiritual decisions. They impact our relationship with God. 3) Stewardship cannot be faked. God knows our hearts as well as our resources.

The PRACTICE of Sharing our Resources

In reality, the things we possess do not belong to us, but are only on loan to us temporarily. God expects us to use them both for his glory and to help others less fortunate than ourselves. He wants us to share that which he has shared with us.

Sharing with God

God wants us to share what we have with him. One of the guidelines God lays down for the use of the money and resources he gives us is that we are to give back to him a portion of it as a sign of gratitude and worship, and as a means of furthering his work here on earth.

In Malachi 3:10 we are told to "bring ye all the tithes into the storehouse (God’s house) that there may be meat in mine house."

In First Corinthians 16:2 Paul instructed us:

"Upon the first day of the week let everyone of you lay by him in store as God hath prospered him."

In Second Corinthians 9:7 we read:

"Every man according as he purposeth in his heart, so let him give; not grudgingly, or of necessity. for God loveth a cheerful giver."

God expects us to give back at least a tenth or a "tithe" of everything he gives us. It is to be done willingly, lovingly, and with a heart of gratitude rather than grudgingly or of necessity. Our giving reflects our attitude toward God.

Proverbs 3:9 says: "HONOUR the Lord with thy substance and with the first fruits of all thine increase." Throughout history God’s people have given back to God a tenth of what he gave to them.
Tithing *commenced* with Abraham in Genesis 14:20. It was *continued* by Jacob (Genesis 28:22); it was *commanded* by Moses and incorporated into the Law (Deuteronomy 14:22); it was *commended* by Christ (Matthew 23:23; Luke 11:42); and it was *communicated* by Paul (Hebrews 7:5,6,8,9; I Corinthians 16:2).

Developing the habit of giving back to God a tenth of what he gives us is a token of our love and gratitude to God. It is a recognition of God's ownership of all we possess. It is an act of humble obedience as we give back to him what is rightfully his. It is a sign of our trust and faith in him to supply our needs as he promised.

Tithing is the "acid test" of our relationship with God. If God doesn't have your pocketbook, he doesn't have you. God asks us to put him FIRST in our lives, to trust him to supply our needs, and to step out in faith by giving back to him a portion of what he has given to us.

*Sharing with Others*

God also wants us to share what we have with others. In Matthew 19:21 Jesus told the rich young ruler to go and "give to the poor," literally to share or distribute his wealth to those in need. In Romans 12:13 Paul said we are to "distribute to the necessity of the saints." In Philippians 4:16 Paul thanked the believers for sending "once and again unto my necessity."

First John 3:17 says:

"But whoso hath this world’s goods and seeth his brother have need and shutteth up his bowels of compassion from him, how dwelleth the love of God in him?"

God gives us more than we need so we might share it with others who are less fortunate than ourselves. That is exactly what God’s people have done throughout history. In Old Testament times they left some of the fruit on the trees and some of the grain in the fields for the poor and for the needy (Leviticus 19:10; Deuteronomy 24:21). Job said he “delivered the poor” (29:12), he was a “father to the poor” (29:16), and he did not withhold from giving to the poor (31:16). He went out of his way to help those who were less fortunate than he was.

In Acts 2:45 we read that many believers in the Jerusalem church “sold their possessions and goods, and parted them to all men, as every man had need.” Some even sold lands and houses, and gave the proceeds to the church to help meet the needs of people who were hurting. They understood that things are to be used rather than loved or hoarded.

Regardless of how much or how little you have, there is someone who has less than you do. It would do us all good to have a massive garage sale, to clean out the junk we have accumulated, and to give the proceeds to people in need. David Platt, who pastors a large mega church in Birmingham, Alabama, has written a book called “Radical.” In it he advocates downsizing, getting rid of the big house, the second car, and the stuff that clutters our lives, and giving the proceeds to those in need. It is worth reading. I recommend it to you.

**The PROMISE to those who Share their Resources with others**

God has promised to bless those who share their resources with him and others (II Corinthians 9:8). That promise, however, is only to those who actually participate in giving to God and others. The previous verse makes this clear when it says:
“EVERY MAN according as he purposeth in his heart, SO LET him GIVE; not grudgingly, or of necessity; for God loveth a cheerful giver.”

In Philippians 4:19 we have the promise that “God shall supply all your need according to his riches in glory by Christ Jesus.” That promises, however, is made only to those who “sent once and again unto my necessity” in verse 16. You can’t claim the promise of verse 19 unless you share your resources with others in verse 16.

**Give regardless of how much you have**

The promise is also to those who are poor, but who give to God and others anyway. The poor widow woman in First Kings 17 could not claim the promise in verse 14 that “the barrel of meal shall not waste, neither shall the cruse of oil fail” until she first shared what little she had with God’s servant Elijah in verse 13. In Mark 12:42-44 Jesus commended the poor widow woman for her generosity in giving all she had even though she had nothing left for herself. In Second Corinthians 8:1,2 the Apostle Paul commended the churches of Macedonia (Greece) for the “riches of their liberality” in spite of their deep poverty. They were poor, but they gave generously.

People who possess little are often more generous than people who have much, but God always meets their needs. My wife’s uncle used to help ring the Salvation Army bell at Christmastime when they put out the red kettles at the entrances of commercial establishments. He observed that often the people who drove the oldest cars and wore the poorest clothing were the ones most likely to contribute while the better dressed folks often avoided looking in his direction and gave nothing. Those who give regardless of how much they have will be blessed by God.

**Give Joyfully**

The promise is to those who give joyfully to God and others. The attitude with which we give is important to God. Second Corinthians 9:7 says: “So let him give; not grudgingly, or of necessity: for God loveth a CHEERFUL giver.” We should give out of hearts full of joy and gratitude and thankfulness for all God has done for us and given to us.

If we remember that the things we possess belong to God rather than us, then there is great joy in giving because in reality we are giving back to God that which rightfully belongs to him. There is even greater joy to be found in giving that which we possess and think of as our own. When you love someone, there is joy in giving to that person.

**Give Regularly**

The promise is to those who give regularly to God and others. First Corinthians 16:2 says,

> “Upon the FIRST DAY of the week let every one of you lay by him in store, as God hath prospered him.”

Some give weekly, some bi-weekly and some monthly depending on their pay schedule. The important thing is that you develop the habit of giving by contributing regularly and systematically.

**Give to the Storehouse**

The promise is to those who give through the “storehouse” to God and others. Malachi 3:10 identifies the “storehouse” as the place to give to God. The “storehouse” was the temple or the house of God. In Acts
4:37 those who gave to meet the needs of others brought the money to the church and “laid it at the apostles’ feet.”

Your tithe and much of your giving to others should be through the local church rather than through other non-profit charitable organizations. Your giving to the church enables it to fulfill its mandate to “make disciples” from among all people groups. If every believer gave a tenth of their income regularly to local churches there would be no shortage of funds available to send missionaries and church planters throughout world. Local outreach efforts and local church ministries would have the funding needed to expand and enhance their efforts to win souls and minister to hurting people in their communities. It is important for every believer to give to his/her local church.

God’s Promise

It is when we give to God that we can claim his promised blessings. Look at the list of promises below that God gives us in his Word when we give to him and to others.

God promises to meet OUR NEEDS when we give to him and to others. Philippians 4:19 says:

“My God shall supply ALL YOUR NEED according to his riches in glory by Christ Jesus.”

God promises to give to us in PROPORTION to how we give to him and others, although it may not always be in a monetary form. Second Corinthians 9:6 tells us:

“He which soweth sparingly shall reap also sparingly; and he which soweth bountifully shall reap also bountifully.”

God promises to give us MORE than we give to him and others. In Luke 6:38 Jesus said:

"Give, and it shall be given unto you; GOOD MEASURE, PRESSED DOWN, and SHAKEN TOGETHER, and RUNNING OVER, shall men give into your bosom. For with the same measure that ye mete withal it shall be measured to you again."

You cannot out give God. You give with your teaspoon and he gives back with his shovel. That does not mean, however, that if we give God ten dollars, he will give us fifteen or twenty dollars in return. His return to us may take the form of the joy and satisfaction we receive from sharing with others or any other number of ways in which the Lord repays us for our obedience and generosity.

God promises to give to us ABUNDANTLY when we give to him and to others. Listen to this amazing promise found in Malachi 3:10 where it says:

“Bring ye all the tithes into the storehouse, that there may be meat in mine house, and PROVE ME now herewith, saith the Lord of hosts, if I will not OPEN you the WINDOWS OF HEAVEN and POUR you out a BLESSING that there shall not be ROOM ENOUGH to receive it.”

Finally, God promises to give us ALL SUFFICIENCY in ALL THINGS when we give to him and to others. Second Corinthians 9:8 says:

“And God is able to make ALL GRACE ABOUND toward you; that ye, ALAWYS having ALL SUFFICIENCY in ALL THINGS, may ABOUND to every good work.”
God will not be your debtor. He always keeps his promises. He has made you his “steward,” his financial manager. He has entrusted you with his resources and has given you guidelines on how to use those resources. And finally, he promises great blessing to all who do as he says.

So, “exercise thyself rather unto godliness” by working hard to develop the habit, the spiritual discipline of PORTIONING your resources with God and with others. Money can buy . . .

A bed, but not rest.
Food, but not satisfaction.
Luxury, but not contentment.
Stocks, but not security.
A house, but not a home.
A church, but not a Savior.

That which money cannot buy, God offers as a free gift.

The habit of giving brings joy and happiness to both the person who is doing the giving as well as to the person who receives the gift. It will expand your faith in God and will help meet the needs of God’s work around the world.
Lesson # 8

Growing in Grace involves Serving in Ministry

The Habit of Participation

Spiritual maturity is one of God’s objectives when he tells us to “GROW in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ” (II Peter 3:18). He wants us to become fully functioning followers of Christ. In Ephesians 4:13 the Apostle Paul makes reference to this when he said:

“Till we all come in the UNITY of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a PERFECT man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ.”

The word “perfect” isn’t talking about us becoming sinlessly perfect or being without defect. Rather, it is referring to us becoming fully developed, completely mature or well rounded. God wants us to grow up, to mature in our relationship with Jesus Christ so we begin to function with the same attitudes, the same values, and the same objectives as Jesus had when he was here on earth.

Spiritual growth is neither spontaneous nor automatic. It is INTENTIONAL and is the result of hard, sustained, disciplined effort. To grow spiritually we must break old, sinful habits and replace them with new, godly habits that result in spiritual growth. The Apostle Paul refers to this as “putting off the old man” and “putting on the new man” in Ephesians 4:22-24.

In First Timothy 4:7 he tells us to “EXERCISE thyself rather unto godliness.” He wants us to develop the spiritual disciplines, the daily routines, the habits that result in spiritual growth and maturity.

We have looked at a number of these habits thus far including:

- The habit of nourishing ourselves spiritually and learning to listen to what God says in his Word, the Bible. We call this the habit of PURSUING God.
- The habit of communing with God and learning to talk with God. We refer to this as the habit of PRAYER.
- The habit of spending time with God’s people and learning to fellowship with other believers. This is the habit of PARTNERING with God’s people.
- The habit of sharing our faith with others and learning how to be a witness for the Lord. We refer to this as the habit of PRESENTING the gospel to others.
- The habit of sharing our resources with God and others by learning to give a tithe to the Lord and helping to meet the needs of others. This is the habit of PORTIONING a segment of our income for God’s use.

Today, we want to look at how to develop the routine of serving others and becoming involved in ministry. We call this the habit of PARTICIPATION. God did not save us to “sit and soak” until it is
time to go to heaven. He saved us and left us here for a purpose, and that purpose is that we might serve HIM by serving others. Let me give you a definition for ministry:

"Ministry is using whatever God has given me to serve Him and the needs of others."

Galatians 6:10 says:

"As we have therefore opportunity, let us DO GOOD unto all men, especially unto them who are of the household of faith."

It is talking about ministry and doing good, serving whenever and wherever, and however we have opportunity. There are a number of things we want to notice in our lesson today.

**Our PURPOSE in Life is to Serve**

*Created to Serve*

We were created to serve. Ephesians 2:10 tells us:

"We are his (God’s) workmanship, CREATED in Christ Jesus UNTO GOOD WORKS which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them."

God created you because he has a job for you to do. There is a ministry, a service he wants you to fulfill. Your birth was not by random chance nor as the result of biological accident. You are here by divine appointment. God has something he wants you to do. It is your purpose in life. It is the reason you are here. You will never find fulfillment, satisfaction or meaning in life until you are fulfilling the ministry role for which God designed you.

*Gifted to Serve*

We have been gifted to serve. Every believer is a gifted individual. Everyone is good at something. God has given you gifts of his grace ("charismaton") that enable you to see and to meet specific needs in the Body of Christ and in the lives of other people.

In Romans 12:6 the Apostle Paul speaks of “having then GIFTS differing according to the grace that is given to US.” In First Corinthians 12:7 he says:

“But the manifestation of the Spirit is given to EVERY MAN to profit withal.”

First Peter 4:10 tells us:

“As EVERY MAN hath received the gift, even so minister the same one to another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God.”

You are a gifted person and God wants you to use your gifts in service to others.
Growing in Grace – Discipleship 201

Placed in the Body to Serve

We have been placed in the Body of Christ to serve. In First Corinthians 12:12 we are told that all believers have been baptized into one body, the Body of Christ or the church. God designs each one of us to fulfill a particular role or ministry within his Body (vs. 27).

The Apostle Paul illustrates this truth by using the example of a human body in verses 14-26. Just as every member of our physical body is designed to fit in a particular place and to fulfill a specific role, so believers are designed to fit in a particular place and to fulfill a specific service. God brought you here and placed you in this church because he has a job for you to do for which he has already shaped and molded your life.

Equipped to Serve

In Ephesians 4:11,12 we are told that God has given gifted men to the church (apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors/teachers) to “perfect” (outfit, equip, prepare, teach, train) the saints for the work of the ministry. I serve as a pastor and teacher, and in serving in those capacities I am fulfilling the role God assigned to me. One of the tasks he wants me to do is to help outfit YOU so you are ready to serve in the work of the ministry in whatever area he has designed for you.

So, each one of us was created for the PURPOSE of serving God and others in various ministry roles. Service is very much a part of growing in grace and in becoming a strong, mature follower of Christ.

It is our PRIVILEGE in Life to Serve

Our Goal

Our goal in life should be to please God. Second Corinthians 5:9 says we are to “labor” or strive toward the goal (it is an athletic term describing a runner stretching toward the finish line) so as to be “accepted” or pleasing to God. First Thessalonians 2:4 says we are not to please men, but God. First Thessalonians 4:1 states that we are to walk (live) so as to please God. And Second Timothy 2:4 makes this statement:

“No man that warreth entangleth himself with the affairs of this life; that he may PLEASE HIM who hath chosen him to be a soldier.”

First Corinthians 10:31 summarizes this concept when it says:

“Whether therefore ye eat, or drink, or whatsoever ye do, do ALL to the GLORY of God.”

We glorify God by serving him (and others) and by doing the work he has created us to do. Listen to what Jesus said in John 17:4:

“I have GLORIFIED thee on the earth; I have FINISHED THE WORK which thou gavest me to do.”

His goal in life was to glorify his heavenly Father, and he did that by serving others and completing the task assigned to him. When you use your gifts and talents to fulfill the ministry role for which he designed you, God is pleased and glorified, and you will have a deep sense of satisfaction and fulfillment.
**Greatest Honor**

The highest calling, the greatest honor in the kingdom of God is to be a servant and to fulfill the task God has given us. In Matthew 25:19-23 you will find the account of a man who divided his goods among three of his servants in accordance with their individual skills and abilities. The first man received five talents, the second received two talents, and the third received one talent.

A “talent” represented a considerable sum of money that was measured by weight rather than value. A single “talent” weighed as little as one hundred fourteen pounds or as much as one hundred twenty-five pounds depending on whether you were measuring gold or silver. Thus, in today’s economy, each individual received the equivalent of a fortune worth millions of dollars. The master than commanded each man to “occupy” until he returned at some future, but unspecified date (Luke 19:13). They were to invest their master’s goods in whatever way they chose so as to increase his holdings, and thereby please their master.

**Well Done**

The first two men invested their master’s resources wisely and doubled their investments. The third man simply put it in a safe place and gained nothing by so doing. Upon his return, the master called each of his servants to account and was very pleased with those who had used their talents wisely. They had fulfilled the task they were given and were commended for doing so. The third man was severely rebuked because he did not use his talent to serve his master nor anyone else. Every believer, like the first two men, wants to hear those words “Well done, good and faithful SERVANT.”

But, in order to hear those words we must become the Lord’s servants and use the talents he has given us to serve him and others. On several occasions the Apostle Paul referred to himself as a “servant,” a “doulos” or a bond slave (Romans 1:1; Philippians 1:1; Titus 1:1). A “servant” is one who serves others. He helps others and ministers to them. That is what a servant does.

**You Serve God when you Serve Others**

When we serve others we are serving God. In Matthew 25:34-36 the king commended those who fed him when he was hungry, those who gave him water to drink when he was thirsty, those who took him in when he was a stranger, those who clothed him when he was naked, those who visited him while he was sick, and those who came to him when he was in prison.

The servants, however, protested that they had never done any of those things for the king (37-39). But look at the answer of the king in verse 40:

“Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren ye have done it unto me.”

When we are serving and ministering to the needs of others, we are in reality serving God and the Lord Jesus Christ. It is a great privilege to be able to serve God by serving others.

**Our PRIORITIES in Life as we Serve**

Determining what God wants us to do, how he wants us to serve, and who we are to help is sometimes perplexing. Ecclesiastes 9:10 says:
“WHATSOEVER thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy might.”

Does this mean we should jump into every ministry opportunity we find? How can one person be expected to do everything? God has gifted us so we can fulfill certain tasks well, but we struggle with other things. So, should we turn down anything we’re not gifted at doing? How are we supposed to decide? Where should our priorities be focused as we seek to serve God?

**Shaped for Ministry**

God has shaped you for ministry. He has formed you with certain insights, concerns, and abilities that indicate what he wants you to do. There are five indicators in your life that point to the areas in which your priorities in ministry should be focused. These five indicators spell the word S.H.A.P.E.

- **S** – the Spiritual Gifts God has given you.
- **H** – the Heart or passion (concern, interest) you have for certain types of people or ministry.
- **A** – the Aptitudes and skills you possess. What can you do well?
- **P** – the Personality you possess. Are you introverted or extroverted? Are you a people-person or task oriented?
- **E** – the Experiences of life God gives you. What joys, victories, heartaches, defeats, and struggles have you gone through, and what lessons did God teach you through them?*

These five things indicate how God has shaped your life for service, and what he wants you to do. You ought to spend the majority of your time in the ministry that best expresses who you are. That's your primary ministry. But in addition to your primary ministry, there are secondary ministries where you may not be as strongly gifted, but where you should be willing to help because you are needed, and because you have a servant's heart.

**The PROCESS of determining how we Serve**

**Talk to God about Serving**

The first step in serving is to make yourself available to serve. Tell God you want to serve him (and others) and ask him to give you opportunities in which to serve. One of the first things Saul of Tarsus did when he got saved was to ask: “Lord, what wilt thou have me to do?” (Acts 9:6). If you go to God with a servant heart and a teachable spirit, and make yourself available to be used by him, I guarantee you he will take you up on it.

**Talk to your Pastor about Serving**

In addition, tell your pastor or another Christian worker you would like to get involved in serving others or in some type of ministry situation. Far too many people are sitting back and waiting to be asked to help and yet they have never given any indication they are willing to serve. In most cases your pastor will have a list of opportunities in which you can get involved.
Accept a Ministry Assignment

The second step is to accept a ministry assignment and the training that goes with it. In many churches you will be given an “entry level” ministry in which to serve. It will be an area in which you can serve and it will be an important task, but the church isn’t going to fall down if you mess up or decide that isn’t for you. You probably will not be given a leadership position right away. In most cases you must first demonstrate your faithfulness and your servant heart. Luke 16:10 says:

“He that is FAITHFUL in that which is LEAST is faithful also in MUCH and he that is unjust in the least is unjust also in much.”

Training and Accountability

Training may or may not be provided for you. If it is provided, take advantage of it and learn all you can about that area of ministry. If training is not provided, ask if there are books you can read, videos you can view or seminars you can attend. You might ask to serve as a helper to someone else and learn from them.

Understand that accountability is part of servanthood. You are not free to do whatever you want, whenever you want or however you want. Find out what the expectations are and then fit into the program. If the leadership wants things done in a certain way, cooperate with them and do what they ask. Ministry is a TEAM effort with each person cooperating with the others for the maximum result.

Try Different Ministries

The third step is to experiment with different areas of service until you find the one that fits you. Experience is one of the best indicators of where God wants you to serve. When you accept a ministry assignment stick with it for three to six months. Don’t quit half way through the quarter. That is not fair to the leadership nor to those with whom you are working. But, if you find that you are unhappy in a particular ministry or that you are ineffective or are unfulfilled, then ask for the opportunity to transition into a different ministry more suited to your ministry S.H.A.P.E. It should not be long before you find the area of service in which you find joy, fulfillment, and fruitfulness.

The PROFIT we receive as we Serve

Changed Lives

The first benefit of serving others is that people’s lives will be touched. Jesus spent a great deal of time serving others. When he did that, people’s needs were met. The blind were caused to see; the deaf to hear; the dumb to speak; the lame to walk; and the grieving to rejoice. The leper was made whole; the dead were made to live; the discouraged were lifted, and the diseased were healed. Your life and your helping hand can touch the lives of others and changes them for the better.

God wants to use you in ways you never dreamed possible. There are a lot of hurting people who need a loving hand, a listening ear, a tender heart, and a kind word. There are babies who need to be held and changed. There are children that need to be loved and taught. There are teenagers who need an understanding adult. There are hurting adults who need someone to lean on. Classes need teaching. Floors need sweeping. Food needs preparing. Money needs counting. Souls need saving. There is no end to the needs that can be met through your service.


**Body of Christ Strengthened**

The second benefit of serving others is that the Body of Christ will be strengthened. Ephesians 4:12 tells us when the saints get involved in doing the work of the ministry it “edifies the Body of Christ.” The word “edify” means to build up, to strengthen, to grow, to bring to maturity. YOU grow spiritually. You mature in your relationship with God as you exercise your gifts in ministry, but so does the Body of Christ, the local church.

If you want a strong church, get involved in serving others. Get involved in the ministry of your church. Make yourself available to serve. People who are busy rowing the boat seldom rock the boat, and the boat goes further and faster than it does when everyone is sitting around waiting for someone else to pick up an oar.

**Fulfillment and Satisfaction**

The third benefit of serving others is that you will find fulfillment and satisfaction. Peace and contentment come from serving God and from fulfilling the purpose for which he created you in the first place. There is no greater joy than to be able to stand back and see what God has accomplished through you, to see the lives that have been touched, the hearts that have been changed, the spirits that have been lifted, and the souls that have been saved.

Jesus Christ was the Son of God and yet when he came into the world he said:

"The Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to MINISTER, and to give his life a ransom for many" (Matthew 20:28).

Ought we not to do the same? If you want to grow spiritually, “exercise thyself rather unto godliness” by developing the habit of PARTICIPATING in serving God by serving others.

* Additional acrostics for determining your ministry shape:

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>D - Desires</th>
<th>S - Spiritual Gifts</th>
<th>P - Personality</th>
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<tr>
<td>E - Events</td>
<td>E - Experiences</td>
<td>L - Learning</td>
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<tr>
<td>S - Spiritual gifts</td>
<td>R - Relational Style</td>
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<td>I - Individual personality</td>
<td>V - Vocational Skills</td>
<td>C - Connecting Passion</td>
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<td>G - Growth</td>
<td>E - Enthusiasm</td>
<td>E - Experiences</td>
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Lesson #9

Growing in Grace involves Resolving Conflict Biblically

The Habit of Peaceful Living

For the past several weeks we have been learning how to GROW IN GRACE (II Peter 3:18), how to exercise ourselves unto godliness (I Timothy 4:7), and how to develop those spiritual disciplines or habits that enable us to become mature followers of Jesus Christ.

Maturity is not measured by what we profess to believe, by the length of time we have been saved nor by the position we may occupy in the church. It is not our learning, but our LIFESTYLE that reveals how far we have progressed in becoming like the Lord Jesus. Maturity is seen in what we DO rather than in what we say.

To grow spiritually requires that we break old, sinful habits and replace them with new, godly habits - habits that over time produce spiritual growth. It usually takes eight to twelve weeks to form a new habit. It requires effort, time, and repetition. Growth does not come easily. It requires a significant investment on our part.

There are seven habits believers need to incorporate into their lives if they want to grow spiritually. These include . . .

- The habit of PURSUING God by nourishing ourselves spiritually through his Word
- The habit of PRAYER or communing with God
- The habit of PARTNERING with God’s people by spending time with them
- The habit of PRESENTING our faith to others
- The habit of PORTIONING our resources with God and others
- The habit of PARTICIPATING in ministry
- The habit of PEACEFUL LIVING by resolving conflict biblically

Today, we are going to look at this seventh habit we need to develop in our lives - the habit of PEACEFUL LIVING by resolving conflict biblically.

Conflict is INEVITABLE

In Luke 17:1 Jesus said, “It is IMPOSSIBLE but that offences will come.” Conflicts, disagreements, differences of opinion, and arguments are a normal part of life. They are a common occurrence in most relationships. You cannot put two sinful, selfish, self-centered people (that describes most of us) together in close contact with each other without conflict eventually raising its ugly head.

Conflict is Part of Life

Cain and Abel experienced serious conflict (Genesis 4:8); Moses had numerous conflicts with the
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children of Israel (Exodus 17:2); Saul and David were at odds with each other (I Samuel 19:2); Euodias and Syntyche were arguing between themselves (Philippians 4:2); and Paul and Barnabas almost came to blows with one another (Acts 15:39).

Job, one of the wisest men of all time, said “man is born unto trouble, as the sparks fly upward” (Job 5:7). Have you ever watched a bonfire at night? You can see sparks flying upward into the nighttime sky as they are lifted by the heat. Job said life is like that. Conflict, trouble, and heartache are a normal part of life. We live in sin-cursed bodies, in a sin-cursed world, and with other sin-cursed people. As a result, conflict is inevitable.

In Second Timothy 3:12 the Apostle Paul tells us that “all that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution.” Even the sinless Son of God faced serious opposition from the scribes and Pharisees (Matthew 15:12). He is telling us that if we are going to be Christians, if we live a godly lifestyle, if we seek to share our faith with others, we are going to experience some conflict. People are not always going to like us. Our godly lifestyle is going to be a rebuke to their ungodly lifestyle, especially if we speak up and say something positive about God or right living. That doesn’t mean we are to keep quiet or try to hide the fact that we are Christians. That would not honor God and would be a violation of Christ’s Great Commission command. He is simply saying conflict is a normal experience in a Christian’s life, so don’t be surprised when it comes your way.

The Causes of Conflict

Conflict has several causes. Pride is the primary cause of conflict between people. Proverbs 13:10 says:

“Only by PRIDE cometh contention, but with the well advised is wisdom.”

Proverbs 28:25 tells us “he that is of a PROUD heart stirreth up strife.” People want their own way. They think they are right. They are too stubborn to back down even when they are wrong.

James 4:1,2 tells us conflict is often the result of our own selfish lusts and desires. He says:

“From when come wars and fightings among you? Come they not hence, even of your LUSTS that war in your members?”

When we don’t get what we want, we often respond in hostility toward whoever we think is keeping us from getting it.

Conflict is often the result of being feeling-oriented rather than command-centered. There are three things that influence whether or not we will experience conflict in our relationships with other people: our FEELINGS, our CHOICES, and our ACTIONS. Most people allow their feelings to govern their choices which in turn control their actions. They feel upset, angry, hurt, betrayed, discouraged or jealous, and so they choose to lash out in anger. They allow their feelings to govern their decisions and their actions, and this inevitably leads to conflict.

Conflict is INVALUABLE

Conflict can be Beneficial

Although conflict may be unpleasant, it is not necessarily bad. It is often good and beneficial because it
forces us to deal with issues and problems rather than sweeping them under the carpet. Conflict enables us to get the situation out into the open where it can be dealt with and resolved. Failing to deal with problems in a timely manner often leads to greater conflict in the future, and even the demise of the relationship.

Conflict helps us to determine what is really important. Some things, while irritating, are not worth fighting over or taking offense about. Proverbs 10:12 says:

“Hatred stirreth up strifes; but love COVERETH all sins.”

First Peter 4:8 tells us:

“For charity (love) shall cover the multitude of sins.”

Proverbs 12:16 points out the following:

“A fool’s wrath is presently known; but a prudent man covereth shame.”

Is the incident in question serious enough to warrant being offended by it? Is it worth holding a grudge over it? If we are honest, a lot of the things we get offended about aren’t really important and should not be a cause for conflict.

**Spiritual Growth**

Conflict gives us a chance to grow spiritually as we respond biblically. Every time conflict arises we have two choices: We can respond in sinful anger and lash out at the other person or we can choose to respond biblically by dealing with the problem as outlined in the Word of God. When we respond biblically we are responding the way Jesus would respond. We become a little more like him. We are growing in grace by doing so. Conflict strengthens us spiritually when we respond biblically.

Conflict often brings the cream to the top. While it brings out the worst in some people, it brings out the best in others. First Corinthians 11:19 says:

“For there must be also heresies among you, that they which are APPROVED may be made MANIFEST among you.”

Dealing with issues in a biblical fashion helps to produce spiritual growth and maturity in people. It often reveals who the godly people are that should be in leadership.

**Conflict is not INSURMOUNTABLE**

In his Word, the Bible, God has given us a detailed process for dealing with conflict and for resolving it biblically. In Matthew 5:22-25 we have the formula for resolving conflict when we are the OFFENDING party. In other words, we are the one who caused the problem. As soon as we become aware that we have offended someone or done something that hurt them or caused a rift between us, WE are to take the initiative to go to them and to seek to resolve the problem by making things right.

In Matthew 18:15-17 we have the process for resolving conflict when we are the OFFENDED party. Someone has said or done something that hurt US. As soon as we take offense, as soon as we feel hurt or
angry over something someone did, WE are to go to them and seek to resolve the problem. Regardless of whether we caused the offense or took the offense, WE are responsible to take the initiative to solve the conflict. The person who is AWARE of the problem is responsible to go to the other person and try to make things right. It doesn’t matter what the other person does or doesn’t do, WE are responsible to seek to correct the issue.

Get your Attitude Right

Here is how to deal with conflict in a biblical fashion: Always begin with prayer to get your heart right with God before you try to talk to the other person. As you pray, ask the Lord if the issue is serious enough to bring it up to the other person. Don’t minimize the problem. If someone has been offended by something you said or did, then it needs to be addressed.

Be sure your motives are right. Are you going for the right reasons? Are you going to tell them off? Are you going to vent your anger? Or are you going because there is rift between you and them, and you want to make it right? Be sure your attitude is right.

The Greek phrase translated “tell him his fault” in Matthew 18:15 carries the idea of approaching someone tentatively. Don’t go charging in making wild accusations. It is possible you may have misunderstood what was said or what was done. Give the other person the benefit of the doubt.

Have a Loving Spirit

Always go with a loving spirit. Pick an opportune time to meet with the person in question. Wait until you have your anger or hurt under control. Pick a time that is mutually convenient when you can be alone without being interrupted. You might invite the person to your home. Or, ask if you can stop by to talk with him. Offer to take the person out to lunch. Be flexible, but make a point of getting with the person as soon as possible to rectify your differences.

Begin on a positive note before introducing the problem area. Follow the Apostle Paul’s example by complimenting the person in some way before introducing the main topic. Find something good to say about them.

Be Honest

Be honest and direct when broaching the subject. Don’t hint around the bush hoping the other person will bring it up. Simply say, “I wanted to talk with you about something that happened the other day that hurt me and I want to resolve the issue so it doesn’t stand in the way of our relationship.” Then gently, kindly tell the person what is bothering you.

Readily admit and confess your wrong in the matter. When you hear the other person’s side of the story you may conclude that you were wrong in taking offense or you may find out that you contributed to the problem in some way. Either way, seek to make things right by confessing your part of the problem. If you were at fault you might say something like this:

"I’m sorry I (tell what you did). I was wrong. I sinned against God and I sinned against you when I did that. Please forgive me for what I did."

Grant Forgiveness

Oftentimes, the other person will respond by asking you to forgive him for his part in the offense. Seek
and grant forgiveness. Forgiveness is a four-fold promise:

- We are promising not to bring up the incident again to the *offender*.
- We are promising not to bring up the incident again to *ourselves*.
- We are promising not to bring up the incident again to *others*.
- We are promising not to let the incident be an *obstacle* in our relationship.

When you forgive a person you are releasing him from responsibility for whatever he said, did or failed to do. He is no longer accountable for it and it is no longer an issue between you. Go out of your way to rebuild your relationship with the other person. Make it a point to talk with him. Be friendly to him. Invite him out for a meal. Genuinely show the love of God to him. Pray with him and for him.

You cannot say, “Well, I forgave him, but I don’t want anything to do with him.” If you do, then you have not forgiven him at all and you are in the wrong. In this case, YOU need to repent and get your heart right with God.

**When Conflict is IRRECONCILABLE**

It is not always possible to resolve conflict with other people. They may rebuff you and your efforts to be reconciled. They may not be willing to meet with you. They may refuse to admit any wrong doing on their part. They may blame you for everything or may refuse to forgive you. Their anger and hurt may be so deep they want nothing to do with you. If after several attempts to make things right without success, what are we to do?

*Ask for Help*

Decide if the disagreement between you and another believer is of sufficient importance to take it to the next step. Ask your pastor or another godly individual in the church for counsel. Is this something that love should cover or is it a serious impediment to your relationship with the other person?

Matthew 18:16 says if we cannot resolve a problem with another person by ourselves alone, then we are to ask one or two other people to help solve the issue. These should be individuals that are known to and respected by the other person. They should be people who will be impartial, fair, and loving in their approach. You are not trying to stack the deck against the other person. The goal is to resolve the problem and to bring about reconciliation.

If the other person refuses to meet with the people you have asked to help you, if he will not listen to them or if he refuses to be reconciled, then the issue is to be turned over to the church for assistance in handling the issue, providing the other person is a member of your church (Matthew 18:17). Go to your pastor and the deacons, and share the problem with them. Tell them about your efforts to resolve the matter. They will then make an effort to contact the other person and hear his side of the story.

If the person refuses to meet with the church leaders or if he is still adamant in refusing to forgive you or to be reconciled after several attempts, then you need to let the church leadership handle the situation from hereon. If the person remains unrepentant, they may recommend that he be dismissed from the church membership and be treated like an unbeliever since that is how he is acting.
Live in Peace

If this occurs, Romans 12:18 comes into play when it says:

“If it be possible, as much as lieth in you, live peaceably with all men.”

Paul is saying that after you have done everything possible to rectify the hurt and the wrongs of the past, if the other person is still unwilling to make things right, then let him go. You have more than fulfilled your biblical responsibilities. Leave it with the Lord and get on with life.

The same would be true if the person is not a member of the church. If after you have made several attempts to be reconciled, but the other person refuses to cooperate, you cannot take the matter to the church. The church has no authority over people who are not members of the congregation. You have fulfilled your obligation to the Lord. Simply pray for the person, forgive them in your heart, and move on with your life.

If you want to GROW IN GRACE, then make a habit of PEACEFUL LIVING by resolving conflict biblically.

Well, there you have it – seven habits that will enable you to grow spiritually and to become a mature, fully-functioning follower of the Savior. Now that you know what to do in order to grow spiritually, follow Paul instructions in First Timothy 4:7 and “exercise thyself rather unto godliness.”

If you have not already done so, begin a daily routine of pursuing God through his Word and talking with him in prayer. Then gradually add each of the other exercises found in these lessons until they become habits that govern your life.

You’ll be happier and your life will be enriched for doing so.