

Growing

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Preacher: Rev. Dr. Russell Herbert

[0 : 00] Well, we're thinking about our church's mission statement over these few weeks. To build, to grow, to reach out. And we're thinking today specifically about growing.

Of course, growing is something that we're called to do as churches, to share the gospel with others, to grow in number. But hand in hand with that, perhaps you could even say at the very root of that, is this vision for us to grow spiritually in our relationship with God.

I'm going to ask you what is going to sound like a really, really deeply personal question. But don't worry, we're not going to do the thing with the microphone and come round, okay?

No one's going to ask you. I'm just going to ask you to think for a few moments about the question. And then we'll come back to it at the end. But I just want you to think for a few moments.

If, if you were asked to put into words what you consider your relationship with God to be like right now, what words would come to mind?

[1 : 07] Now don't say them. Don't even whisper them to the person. I just want you to think about them. Just give you a few moments to think about that. Now I want to ask you the question, or else it could be a hard one.

What do you wish you could say? Or where would you like that relationship with God to be, say five years from now?

It may be hard to actually find words to express that, but just pull some images in your mind and hold them there for a few moments. How do you long for that relationship to be with God over the next few years?

That could be quite a painful question. It could be one that you really, really struggle to answer. We'll come back to that at the end.

But what I want us to think about over these next few minutes is something that is really, really fundamental to Christian faith. So fundamental that perhaps sometimes we don't even say very much about it.

[2 : 36] But it's this. That when it comes to faith, we talk about conversion, if you like. In other words, making a decision to follow Jesus.

We might make that decision gradually, or it might be a very sudden thing. And you might be able to say, yes, I became a Christian on this particular date. Or it might have been a more gradual coming to faith.

It might have been a mixture of both events and process. But we talk about it, about making a decision to become a Christian, to follow Jesus. And it's a choice that only you can make as an individual.

No one can make it for you. But the other part that perhaps we don't really talk that much about is what happens next. And it's really important.

In fact, John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, would have said that, in fact, he did say that it was as important. And one of the real strengths of Wesley's theology was that he emphasized not only the importance of making a decision to follow Jesus, but throughout his ministry maintained that once you make that decision, it continues to be a daily one.

[3 : 47] The growth, to use the theological term sanctification, growing in that relationship with God, matters every little bit as much as the decision in the first place that took you to that relationship.

Now that, on the one hand, could sound daunting. On the other hand, it's immensely encouraging. Because what it means is no matter how you feel about your relationship with God right now, whether you feel that's a really great thing, or whether you feel that, frankly, it feels lousy or almost non-existent, according to that theology, it says that God's view of things is that he wants it to be bigger, and deeper, and greater.

That there is always more ahead. You cannot exhaust the experience of God. When we get to eternity, it's going to be awesome. Right now, it's a struggle.

But right now, wherever that may be for you, God's got even greater things ahead. You might not be aware of it. You might not know what that looks like. But God does.

And God wants you to grow. He wants every single one of us to grow. That's the view that the Bible presents us with.

[5 : 13] Now, the Bible is not a human book about God. It is God's book about what it is to be human. And so when we read through the narrative over all of those hundreds of years, which was written by all of those different people, we find a story that emerges, that paints a picture of what God wants our lives to be like, ultimately in eternity, but right here on earth right now, leading up to eternity.

And it's a story which tells of how God wants us to grow, how God wants us to live. But at the same time as telling that story, it also warns of the dangers and the pitfalls.

And talks of how the experience of being human is one in which, on the one hand, we feel this draw to the things of God. These things deep within our being that pull us towards the sense of the divine.

The things that are bigger, are greater, are fuller, are richer, are so much better. And yet at the same time, there is that pull in the other direction, which the Bible talks about the draw of the devil.

Now, it's important for us to be quite clear that what that does not mean is a sort of a picture, classic picture of a creature with a tail and horns and a pitchfork. It's not like that.

[6 : 27] It's far more subtle. But it's a reality that is there. And if we take an honest look at the reality of human experience, we don't have to look that far to see actually it's very, very plausible.

That every day we face choices and decisions, some that would take us in a very good, positive direction, but others which would take us in a direction that actually can lead to our downfall. And that when we look at that direction, very often it looks much more attractive.

But it's not. Now, God wants us to live. Interestingly, if you take the letters L-I-V-E that spell live and you reverse them, you get the word evil.

And that actually is the very thing that the Bible's narrative warns us about. That God wants us to grow as we go through life, but the devil wants us to reverse that.

He wants to pull us in the other direction. But it's very clever at putting things before us in our daily decisions in a way that look attractive and inviting, but actually will stop us from growing.

[7 : 38] Very often it will run very contrary to our instincts. And we will think, well, actually, I'd much rather do this. It seems so much more attractive. But taking a longer-term view of things, if we follow that path, it actually will pull us in the opposite direction from life and growth.

Don't be fooled. As a story I've shared before, but I'm going to tell it again, And it's apparently true that how some, in some parts of the world, wolves are caught.

What they do is, this is in parts of the world where it's really, really cold. They get a knife, and they get a dead animal, and they dip the knife in the animal's blood, and they freeze it.

And then they do it again. They take the knife, and they dip it in blood, and they freeze another layer of blood around it. And they keep on repeating this process until eventually they have a block of frozen animal's blood, and in the middle of that block is this very sharp knife.

And then they put it in the snow, and they leave it overnight. The wolf comes along, and it catches a whiff of this blood, and it likes the smell of it, and so it starts to lick away at the blood.

[9 : 00] Now, it's very nice. It's very good. It represents the very meat that it's craving. And so the more it gets, the more it wants. And it licks away, and it licks away, and it licks away, and as it happens, it's feeding its sense of craving for the blood.

And yet the more it gets, it can't get quite enough, and so it licks away more and more and more, licking away layer after layer after layer of the frozen blood until eventually the wolf's tongue is lashing away against the edge of the knife.

At that point, it's still drinking blood, but it's no longer cold. It's wolf, because it's the wolf's own blood. Eventually, they come along in the morning, and they find the dead wolf caught.

You're never going to eat another strawberry split ice cream in the same way again. I'm sorry it's a gruesome story. But it paints a powerful picture of the way in which, it's an old-fashioned word, but I'm going to use it, sin works in our lives.

Because it has about it a certain attraction. That is why the Bible warns us of its dangers. If it wasn't subtle, we wouldn't need to be warned.

[10 : 11] If every time we face a choice, and the option that was better for us was actually the easier one, we wouldn't need to talk about it. We wouldn't need to read Scripture. We wouldn't need the teachings of Jesus.

We wouldn't need the writings of Paul. But it is difficult, because it's subtle, and it's not always obvious. And it's how things work on our lives. God wants us to grow.

He wants us to live. But the tactics of the enemy are to reverse that, and to present things to us in such a way that seems attractive, but actually leads to our destruction.

What might that look like in practical terms? We're going to think about it in just a moment. But first of all, I just want to say this. As we need to be careful when we face choices in our daily lives, let's not be fooled by liberal Christianity.

Liberal Christianity is dangerous because it mis-sells the fullness of the Christian gospel. Years ago, a writer called A.W. Tozer warned of the false freedom of so-called liberal Christianity.

[11 : 20] You see, liberal Christianity simply lowers the bar. Liberal Christianity does not take seriously the intimacy of encounter that lies at the very heart and soul of the relationship with Jesus Christ that is at the heart of the Christian gospel.

Liberal Christianity exchanges a cheap, diluted vision of holiness for the fullness of what God wants in our lives. Selwyn Hughes wrote, we are made for the big and we are restless in our littleness.

We need to grow. God wants us to grow. And only a true, full picture of what that looks like can enable it to happen. So let's think in practical terms then and let's go to the scripture verse that we've just heard read to us as to what this might look like in terms of growth.

If we are serious about growing in relationship with God, just to come back to that question that we started with, if we really want to grow, then this very practical passage from Thessalonians gives us, happens to give us three things in those verses that we need to be mindful of and pay attention to.

The first thing is this. In verses four and six of that passage from Thessalonians, we're told to honour the body that God has given us.

[12 : 44] The body in which we live is God's gift to you. Now sometimes with the aches and pains, and I know about them in my mid-forties already, we might not feel that our bodies are God's gift to us at that point in time.

Clive's had dentistry done this week and I'm sure he might not have been thinking that at the time. But, you know, the body that we have is God's gift to us.

It's the thing in which we live our lives. And as Christians, we're called to honour it. Now again, let's get back to that picture that we have within Scripture, within the Bible, of the vision of life in all fullness.

God wants us to live. That means we live within our bodies. And it means that when we come to believe in Jesus Christ, it's not just a decision that we make with our minds, but rather, and this is where it's an extraordinary vision, the Bible presents us with a picture that says that when you follow Jesus, the Holy Spirit of God comes to live and dwell within you.

That's quite awesome. As Paul puts it, he says that the body becomes like a temple in which the Holy Spirit dwells. That's amazing.

[14 : 07] Because that means that any situation that you face in life, all of those tough decisions, all of those tough places, those places that otherwise can make you feel that you're a long way off from God, we need to remember that when you follow Jesus, the promise is God's Holy Spirit isn't only with you, he's in you.

He dwells within you. There's nowhere where you can be where God isn't there because he goes before you, he goes with you, he goes in you.

And so, when we have this picture within Scripture of being a Christian as being a temple of the Holy Spirit, it's a picture that says God's presence, his living presence, the same presence that raised Christ from the dead, is in you.

We might not always be conscious of that presence, but it is a presence that is there and that is the promise of Scripture. And it's for that reason that we need to take seriously the warning to respect our bodies, to honour our bodies, to control our bodies.

And so, when it comes to lifestyle, within Scripture, we're given a picture of the God who created our bodies, who created the potential to do wonderful, great things with our bodies.

[15 : 33] God created sex and sexuality as a gift, and he gave us a frame within which it is to be honoured and respected. That is why the things that we read in Scripture are not prohibitions, but rather they are safety warnings.

Just as fire can be used as something that is immensely creative and helpful and life-saving, when it is misused, it can be destructive, it can kill.

So, we have that frame within Scripture which warns us for our own safety and for our own lives.

If we want to truly live, we need to live in a certain way for the sake of freedom and true life. So, two things.

Firstly, if we find this is an area of struggle, if we find that actually thoughts are ever being led in a direction that is not healthy, don't beat yourself up with a pile of guilt.

[16 : 43] Because, remember, temptation is not the same thing as the reality of destructive sin. Martin Luther, hundreds of years ago, noted for his brashness, was approached one day by a young man who said that he was always having thoughts that were taking him into a place where he knew was wrong and he felt so ridden with guilt.

Martin Luther turned around to him and he said this, he said, you can't stop the birds from flying but you can stop them nesting in your hair. The second thing is that if you've messed up and in different ways every single human being in history messes up in some way or another, if you've messed up, remember, God meets you in that place.

He forgives you and he sets you free for a new beginning. Remember, scripture is loaded of people who made massive mistakes in the way that they abused their bodies.

David committed adultery with Bathsheba and sent her husband off to the front line and had him killed. He was forgiven. Jesus met the woman who had been caught in adultery and they were ready to stone her for the shame.

and he turned around and said that who he or she is commit, who is perfect, cast the first stone and they were forced to have to walk away.

[18 : 11] You see, the God who wants to dwell in us meets us where we are at. He won't leave us in that place but he meets us where we are at right now.

The second thing that we're told in that passage there is to love one another. If we're serious about growing, if we really, really want to grow, then we're told to love one another.

Verses 9 and 10. Notice, Jesus commanded us to love one another if we're serious about being disciples, if we want to grow. But Jesus never said that we've got to like one another.

And it wouldn't make sense because like is not love. You see, like is a response, it's an impulse, it's a reaction, it's something almost that happens to you that you can't really help.

And we can't help the things that we like and we don't like. It's like talking about music or about food or about colour. You can't help it if you don't like Marmite.

[19 : 16] I can't help it if I don't like the Eurovision Song Contest. You don't choose what you like. But love is different.

Yes, love can be a feeling but it's so much more than that because the difference is love can be a choice. Love, in its most profound sense, can mean I don't like this but I'm going to make a decision anyway.

I'm going to make a decision to do things that are going to make me feel uncomfortable, that I don't really want to do, that I don't like doing but I'm going to do them out of love.

Which means we might not like someone. We might not like the things that they do but we can resolve to love them. And as we do so, that spiritual muscle within us begins to grow as it is exercised so it strengthens and grows.

So, respecting the body, honouring the body, loving one another and lastly, Paul says, make it your ambition to live a quiet life.

[20 : 36] Now, what does that mean? Because Paul didn't exactly live a quiet life, did he? Wherever he went he seemed to spark off the odd riot or two through the things that he said and did.

So, what was he going on about when Paul, one of the most controversial people in history, talked about making it your ambition to live a quiet life?

Well, to understand it we need to take a closer look at both one and two Thessalonians, both letters. Because a theme in both of those letters is that we are to be ready for when Christ returns.

And it's generally considered that at the time when this was a big theme among the church in Thessalonians, that there were some believers who felt that because it was so likely that Jesus could return at any point and they needed to be ready that they gave up their jobs.

They stopped working. And in their time they found themselves slipping into obsessing about Jesus who was going to return and slumped into a state of idleness.

[21 : 45] They spent their whole time talking, gossiping, and interfering with other people's lives, but doing very little else. Now, what might that reality 2,000 years ago in another place mean to our reality today in this place?

Well, there's something in our human nature that makes us feel better when we talk about other people in a way that focuses in on their faults and their weaknesses.

We do it as human beings, probably because it detracts us away from our own faults that we'd rather not think about. But the place where we are most susceptible to do that is when we have no active responsibility.

Now, just as those people that Paul was writing to had no active responsibility because they'd given up their jobs, convinced that Jesus was going to return any day, but then quickly slumped into gossip and idleness.

So that can happen to us when we don't take responsibility for the stuff of the kingdom. Let me say what I mean. When I was training for ministry, I know that I was at my most cynical when I had no responsibility.

[23 : 06] When I wasn't on placement, and I come from a position of being in church leadership before training, but I found myself then training with no responsibility. It was different when I was out on placement, but when I wasn't on placement and I was just there in the college and then going off to different churches, I would sit there and I suddenly clicked into critical mode.

And I'm convinced it's because I had no responsibility. Now, last year I was on sabbatical. Again, I had no responsibility for 12 weeks.

And I went to different churches during that time to see how different churches did things. It was a wonderful experience. Now, I didn't stick around any of these ones long enough to slump into cynicism, but I think that had I done so, it wouldn't have been that long before I would have done.

Because I know the reality of how I function as a human being. That when I have no responsibility for something, the very worst of my cynical instincts come out.

And it becomes very easy for us to criticise other people when we're not doing things ourselves. And I think it's in that respect that these words of Paul have something important to say to each one of us by way of a challenge.

[24 : 22] that if we find ourselves in that place of gossip, in that place of criticising what others are doing, we perhaps need to turn the challenge back to ourselves and ask ourselves the questions, what are we doing with our lives?

The seedbed of destructive cynicism, gossip, and judgmentalism is where we take a back seat in our Christianity and become armchair spectators.

If we want to grow, if we're serious about growing in our relationship with God, we need to do something and to exercise that spiritual muscle. So here's a challenge.

All of us are getting older. We're all one hour older than we were when we came into this place this morning. Here we go. But as we go through our lives, we all get older, but we don't all necessarily all grow.

So let's come back to where we started. Where do you want to be? Where would you love to be? You know, it's very easy for us to slump into a sense of guilt when thinking about these things.

[25 : 41] Guilt can be very destructive. Guilt can also be creative. There is such a thing as productive guilt. It can take a creative role. So if we start to feel uncomfortable, that can be a helpful thing.

One man was once writing a letter to the Inland Revenue, and in his letter he wrote this, I can't sleep at night, and so I'm enclosing 100 pounds that I omitted to declare.

He went off, he thought a little bit, and he came back and said, if I still can't sleep, I'll send the rest. Guilt can have a creative function, but it can also be destructive.

Jesus did not come to rub it in, he came to rub it out, and that's important. He wants you and I to grow. Wherever we are at right now, he not only wants us to grow, but he wants to help us to grow.

So let's just come back to where we started, to that question, where are you right now, and where do you long to be? The writer Rick Warren painted a picture, and I want to finish with this.

[26 : 55] He said, imagine that you're in a speedboat on a lake, and you've got an autopilot on that speedboat that's been set to take you east.

And you make a decision that you're not going to go in that direction, you want to go west. You can do one of two things to make that change direction. The first thing you can do is you can grab hold of the steering wheel, and you can force the boat to change direction.

That will work for a while. But continual resistance will be your experience. Your arms will begin to ache and to get tired, and eventually you'll probably let go, and the boat will head back west.

Now, willpower is important. It's an important part in life when it comes to growing, but willpower alone will only get you so far. See, the other thing you could do with that boat is you could just change the autopilot.

Paul writes, do not be conformed to the thinking of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.

[28 : 11] So as we come to pray now, let's ask God to meet us where we are, and that's good because that is always where he meets us, and to move us in the direction that he wants us to take.

Thank you. Thank you. I'm thank you. Thank you I'm doubling for we want to get over percent the