

Growing-in-Grace

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Preacher: David Calderwood

[0 : 00] So as a teenager, I thought my parents' role in life was to spoil my fun and restrict my freedom. Seriously, that's what I thought.

When I went to university, I discovered a form of freedom, the freedom I had longed for, and I quickly realised it wasn't what it promised to be.

It wasn't even what I wanted. And I realised then how much my parents had just poured love into my rebellious, foolish life.

And from that point on, I've been really intentional in being a better son, in loving and honouring my parents in the way that they properly deserved.

And I think it's like that, isn't it, for most things we value in life, things that are really at the heart of who we are. Whether it's relationships and roles, like husband or wife, or being a child, or being a parent, or a grandparent, being a father, being a mother, being a friend.

[1 : 07] All those relationships, or whether it's wider than that, whether it's a work situation, or a hobby, or music, or a career, or sport. Whatever it is that we value in life, whatever is at the heart of things for us, then it's natural that we want to get better at doing those things, at being those things.

We want to grow. We want to mature. We want to thrive. We want to excel in the things that we do. And to get there, we then are quite intentional.

We're quite passionate. Sometimes even a bit obsessive. Because these things are so important to us. So we train endlessly.

We read widely. We learn as much as we can. We hang out with others who are ahead of us in skills and maturity, so we might learn from their wisdom and pick up their model.

But I need to confess something to you this morning, as I stand here before you. That while I'm passionate to get better, to grow in almost every relationship I'm in, and every role I have in life, there have been too many times in my life when my passion and intentionality for growing in Christ has been dwarfed or eclipsed by other passions in my life.

[2 : 59] Too many times. This morning I want to challenge you, as I've been challenged this week in preparing for this morning, I want to challenge you to think about how passionate you are in growing in Christ.

Because the Bible tells us very clearly, God tells us in his word very clearly, that you have been saved from sin to holiness.

But are you passionate in nurturing the mind of Christ and demonstrating the mind of Christ in your actions, in whatever role or position you have in life, whatever relationship you're engaged in?

Are you passionate so that practically you actually are getting better at serving Christ in a world that's hostile to him?

Are you passionate in your determination to become like Christ in your attitudes and in your speech and in your actions?

[4 : 39] In confronting this reality, you may, in thinking about this, you may have to confront the reality that as we think through this series of God's words, you actually might have to realize that yes, well, I'm actually quite passionate about God and learning about God and I'm quite passionate about the Bible and using it and learning it.

I'm quite passionate about the idea of salvation and being saved. I'm even quite passionate about being part of this local church. But here's the catch, you see, we can be passionate about all those things and not actually passionate about growing in Christ.

Passionate about the peripheral things. That peripheral doesn't mean unimportant, but they're not central.

And yet not passionate about the central thing of becoming like Christ. Growing up into Christ as a saved or died for person in the context of this church community and with the help of the Holy Spirit and the Bible.

So again, you see, this is one of these words that God has spoken clearly about. Growing in Christ is not an optional extra for us Christians.

[6 : 03] even though it appears that that's what many Christians seem to think. Galatians 5, 13 to 26 is built around a huge contrast.

On the one hand, we have the flesh or what that means is it's not the physical flesh, it's the spiritual flesh. That is, the old, distorted, rebellious expression of self.

And on the other hand, it's contrasted with the renewed, spirit-driven expression of self. And this contrast, it's a huge contrast, happens in the context of a key word here which is called freedom. Look at verse 15, 13 rather. For you were called to freedom, brothers. Called to freedom. And we need to understand freedom if we're to understand the contrast.

So, the fact that freedom is a calling suggests it's a basic characteristic of being a Christian. Of being gospel-shaped people as we respond to God's grace in our lives.

[7 : 21] The same idea begins chapter 1. So look back to chapter 5. Look back to verse 1 of chapter 5. It says there, for freedom, Christ has set us free. Freedom is the consequence or the natural outworking of being in Christ.

A fundamental aspect of being a Christian. And the fact that there's repetition in that sentence for freedom, Christ has set us free, suggests and emphasizes that Christ has liberated us into freedom with the intention that we would experience and grow and enjoy the life of freedom.

It doesn't just make us free. The intention is that we have a life of freedom. That we grow into that. My friends, this concept of freedom, this concept of growing in Christ is more than just a theory. It's even more than an expectation. It's a command. Like so many other commands in the scriptures, grow in Christ.

But what does this freedom look like in the life of a Christian? Well you see, we think freedom, as I mentioned in my introduction, we think of freedom as having, as being free from restraint so that I'm able to do what I want to do when I want to do it.

[8 : 58] Freedom from restraint in how I express myself. But when you dig down into that notion, of freedom, it actually isn't possible because constantly we're bashing into things that restrict our freedom.

I'm restricted constantly by my gender. To the extreme, I can't get pregnant and deliver a baby. I can't create another human being because I'm a bloke.

I can't fly through the sky unassisted. I can't live under the sea unassisted. I'm constantly coming against restraints by gender and my humanness.

So the idea of freedom that our society bandies around just doesn't work in practice. The Bible, on the other hand, is much more realistic. So true freedom as defined by God is the ability and desire to be what I was created to be.

God tells us that humans were created to enjoy relationship with him, to enjoy relationship with one another as image bearers under God, to creatively enjoy this physical world full of all good things that he's made for us.

[10 : 16] But this freedom, we're also told in the scripture, was lost as a result, a consequence of rebellion. And then as the passage of Bible follows through, the story of the Bible, we're told then that the gospel restores true freedom again as a consequence, this time a consequence of Christ's rescue mission which undid the effects of rebellion and restored full relationship between God and his people.

God's purpose is not just to make us free in the storyline of the Bible, his purpose for the world. God's purpose is not just to make us free but that we enjoy the life of freedom that we were created for, available to us now in Christ.

And in the context of the letter to the Galatians, practically that meant freedom from slavery, the slavery of trying to earn acceptance with God through their own religious efforts and any notion of somehow or other having some sort of intrinsic goodness to bring to the table as we negotiate relationship with God.

That's what we're set free from ultimately. The freedom we have in Christ is in being made acceptable to God and actually coming into what the Bible calls forever relationship with God by

grace, by God's initiative alone.

Not our performance, being good, keeping God's rules, doing religious things, but Jesus' performance on our behalf. And added to this idea of freedom is the reality of renewal by God's spirit.

[12:10] Verse 5, we won't stop for through the spirit by faith we ourselves eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness. The spirit is working daily within us to produce new gospel attitudes, new gospel desires, new gospel thinking, new gospel orientation towards heaven and being with Christ and being like Christ so that practically we grow in our reliance on what God does for us.

in Jesus. And that is expressed then in radically different lifestyle and radically different actions and thinking and speaking on the outside.

Growing in Christ is the freedom we were given. The command we were given. that also means then as we look further into this passage here that growing in Christ is more than a command.

It's also a promise. Being called, verse 13 again, being called to freedom, to live the truly free life in Christ carries with it the promise that genuine commitment and struggle to express daily who we now are in Christ will actually result in growing Christ-likeness in holiness.

Why? Because we have the spirit working for that same end within us. The renewing work of God's spirit within believers creates and actually helps or assists us grow in holiness, in Christ-likeness, in the mind of Christ, whichever term you want to use there.

[14:08] The desire and ability to be loving, obedient, worshipping servants of God as we were created to be. And that is true freedom in the Holy Spirit, in Christ.

Christ. And what's the evidence of growing in freedom, of growing in Christ, growing into Christ-likeness?

What's the evidence? We'll look at verse 13, 14, 15. The short answer, says Paul, one word, love. More extended answer, generous, purposeful, other person centred commitment to serving, building up one another in a Christian community, this church family.

Love your neighbour as yourself. So familiar that old verse, isn't it? That little statement. That's so hard to do. So foreign.

Did pretty well all of us here. many plants are propagated by taking a really healthy, vigorous root stock and grafting onto that root stock a cutting from some other species or plant that you want to grow.

[15:44] And the evidence of the success of that graft is that the cutting starts to grow. and ultimately produces fruit.

Well, the evidence of being successfully grafted into Christ, and that's the language of John chapter 15, grafted into the vine, the Lord Jesus. The evidence of being successfully grafted into freedom in Christ is growth.

in displaying practically the mind of Christ. In other words, we're getting our life and direction from the rootstock, which is Christ.

a desire and commitment to modelling the love and grace of God and Jesus, which we ourselves have received. We then want to pass it on. That's the evidence of that graft, being successful and being real.

My friends, the authentic Christian life, the authentic Christian life is seen in the lifelong obsession and struggle to express and demonstrate who we are in Christ.

[17:06] Use a different picture. We're under new management. The Holy Spirit, according to Galatians, here we'll move into the next verses in a few seconds, the Holy Spirit is now our controlling passion.

And daily our struggle is to overflow in that which reflects the mind of Christ mediated to us through the Holy Spirit. That is, to overflow in a desire to say yes to righteousness, to choose righteousness and to say no to that which reflects our old sinful, distorted self-expression.

To say yes to righteousness because that reflects our new master, our new manager, our new owner, as it were. It reflects his character, it reflects his wishes.

And so we want to say no to anything that's in competition with that. So the question then is, what will you cultivate and what will you kill off?

In order to produce good fruit and heaps of it, a plant requires cultivation, purposeful cultivation. It needs to be fed, it needs to be watered, and it needs to have around about it anything that will compete, weeds, any other thing, plant around it needs to be removed so that plant will thrive and

produce fruit.

[18 : 39] Paul's saying here for us as Christians as we think about growing in Christ, there can only be one controlling passion. either it will be the flesh, says Paul, our old distorted self-seeking, self-governed attitudes, desires, and thinking, either that will shape our pattern of living or our new spirit-driven, spirit-enabled attitudes, desires, and thinking and actions will drive us.

they can't both be operating at the same time, says Paul, because they're totally opposed to one another. They're pulling us in different directions. That's why Paul uses towards verse 23, 24, 25 there, Paul uses the language of crucifixion.

Crucify your flesh, says Paul. Now, that's a very violent word, and Paul uses it, I take it, because it demonstrates the ruthlessness with which we have to deal with ourselves in killing off anything that competes for our loyalty or threatens to shape us contrary to how Christ wants us shaped by spirit. That language doesn't resonate with us in 2019, does it? Who, for goodness sake, who crucifies themselves?

We don't mind praising ourselves, but the language of crucifixion is not easily applied. We won't allow others to apply it to us, and we certainly don't want to apply it to ourselves.

[20 : 31] But here's the point, you see. Paul's issue here is if we're not growing in Christ, then we're allowing that space to be filled and shaped by attitudes, thinking, or actions which are opposed to living under Christ's rule by Christ's spirit.

That's verse 17. So Paul's point is this, that our outward actions, our outward words, are an indicator of our inward character and actions, an indicator of our real controlling passion.

See, we can say we're controlled by the spirit, but the acid test is, what do our words say? What do our actions say?

What do our attitudes say? And it's not just about books ticking when we go to talk about growing in Christ.

It's not as if we're just here, we've got a list of things, and these are all bad things, and these are all good things. So it's not as if we're just trying to tick all the boxes and change our behaviour so we've got all the right things in place.

[21 : 50] It's not just about that. It is about that, but it's not just about that. It's not just about trying to get the bounds right so we do more good things in life than bad things.

It's about a process, it's about a pattern of living, it's about a habit of life, which is characterised by inward controlling passion.

And there are only two possibilities. Let's have a look at them in verses 19 through to 21, and we're just going to take a walk through them. It's interesting that when we read through these passages, and I make no comment here to Catherine, but we actually tend to read the works of the flesh quicker, and then we slow down when it comes to reading the fruits of the Spirit.

I'm going to reverse it this morning. Verses 19, 3 to 21 is the expression of a life dominated by the old nature.

And I want you to notice several things as we walk into this slowly. That the whole thing, all of it, I say, is marked by self-centeredness, by divisiveness, by aggressiveness, by the consumerist relationships that Paul mentions in verse 15.

[23 : 16] But if you bite and devour one another, watch out that you're not consumed by one another. So the works of the flesh are, as it were, a living, breathing demonstration of that very thing.

And as we slow down and dig into this, man, it's nasty. The second thing I want you notice about this list before we move into it is not just a remote, random list of characteristics that sort of bad people somewhere out there might do.

Paul's writing this to the Christians in the churches in Galatia. We can't hold it at arm's length.

We've got to engage with it personally and individually. Is this me? Well, let's have a look at verse 19.

The works of the flesh, they're evidence, says Paul. Sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality.

[24 : 25] There's the first group, verse 19. A whole range of what? Self-gratifying, exploitative, sexual expression.

And who's at the center of that? Me, me, me, my needs, my desires. So contrary to the way we were created to be in our expression of self.

But it gets worse, gets more personal, verse 20. Look at that long list going through there. And every one of those things describes in part something of the endless pain and mess we cause in relationships when we make ourselves the center of life rather than God. Idolatry is acting like I am God. Me, me is everything and demands that others fall into line with me. me and if you don't fall into line with me then you can expect me to do my best to take you down. Sorcery.

[25 : 47] Well, we might think, well, that's something relegated to the olden days as well, or pagan societies. Well, sorcery, when you dig down into it, is people trying to manipulate the lives of others. people in animistic societies they do that with special words and special potions and special incantations. And personally, I think we Christians have a very sophisticated way of doing the same thing in the context of quasi Christian language.

So we have special words sharing and fellowship. The means by which we communicate mistruths, misrepresentations of others around us, untruths about others around us.

Why? Because we're trying to manipulate relationships and outcomes. Enmity. You might disagree with the sorcery one.

That's fine. I don't care. But enmity. You can come with me on this one. Enmity is, you can check these words out for yourself, it's an attitude that assumes the worst about others and is happily content to push people into opposing divided hostile camps.

[26 : 59] Strife. A preparedness to go to war with people, with those with whom you disagree because you're so convinced of your own right and your own rights. Jealousy.

Wondering what God has given to others and been dissatisfied with what God has given to us. Fits of anger or rage. Well, that's really just unleashing ruthless strategies to try and overpower or blaster our way through and get what we want.

rivalries. They come out of continual self-promotion, continually pushing my profile at the expense of others.

Dissensions and divisions, acting to get what you want regardless of the impact on unity and community. Envy.

A bit like jealousy. It's the attitude that can't stand by and let others have success that you believe is yours to have. Drunkenness and orgies.

[28 : 07] Well, most commentators think that's a separate category. I'm just lumping it in here. You can, again, do what you like with what you think I've done. But anyway, it's sort of when all that sometimes fails and we sometimes look for relief and for satisfaction and comfort in other things, things other than God.

And those things are often taken up as an overflow of brokenness and frustration in relationships and attempt to fix them ourselves or fix them with something else rather than going back to God and repentance.

Now, friends, the last time I said this sentence I got into a serious amount of trouble, so here goes again. these attitudes and characteristics are alive and well in our church family and thriving in some parts.

We so easily live with them. We so easily cultivate them by actually engaging with those who want to give expression to these sorts of things privately.

We have conversations with them and thereby cultivate them. We give them oxygen when we should be saying to one another, no, stop. We've got to kill these things off.

[29 : 33] Otherwise, they're slowly conversation by conversation killing us off as a church. in contrast, verses 22, 23, and 24, the expression of a life dominated by our new spirit-driven nature.

That's the overflow of the mind of Christ developing within us, growing in the life of freedom, growing in Christ, cultivating the fruit of the spirit. Notice here there's only one fruit.

It's not fruits of the spirit so that we can sort of cherry pick and take the ones we want and leave the other ones and sort of play them off and say, well, I've got this one, I've got patience and love, so therefore I don't need to worry about these other ones.

No, it's one fruit of the spirit. Together they characterize what we ought to be as Christians.

Christians. And notice also that they're not just, again in contrast to the other ones, they're not just a warm fuzzy description of what Christians will sort of be automatically by virtue of being Christians.

No, these things are really hard work to get a hold of and to develop and grow in. They're seriously hard to cultivate and call for real radical change.

[31 : 03] And generally we need incentive to change. We need to believe that the gospel shaped life is far more attractive and beautiful than where we are at the minute.

That's why we will be motivated to change in large part. So again, the question is, as we see this contrast, is how attractive is our current position as opposed to how attractive is this spirit-driven, spirit-controlled place, the fruit of the spirit.

Love. Moving towards one another and serving people for their own good without promise of personal benefit in return.

Joy. Finding satisfaction in God, not in people's responses to you. Peace. Being committed to reconciling and restoring relationships for Ireland, being committed to destroying them.

Patience. Being generous to others when they get it wrong, repeatedly. Kindness, goodness, faithfulness. Demonstrating a steady display of grace and commitment to serving others when you may well have reason to withdraw from them because of their failures.

[32 : 23] Gentleness and self-control. Humility towards others arising from a very healthy self-awareness. Ask yourself, my friends, are you growing in Christ?

Is growing in Christ a passion for you? Do you think you've arrived at an end point, the end point that God has for you simply because you are a Christian, you've been saved, you've been delivered from your sin, you're now secure, you have a place kept for you in heaven.

Is that the end point for you? And so you live easily without concern to showcase the mind of Christ and grow to maturity in Christ.

And I ask each of you, as I've looked at myself this week, and I genuinely have looked at myself this week, as I do every week in preparation, I want you to go back and revisit the conversations you've had over the past week, the past month, the past year, and ask yourself which controlling passion did you communicate to the person you were speaking to in your conversation?

Was it, did it sit easily in this context of the fruit of the Spirit? Or would your conversations be better fit for verse 26?

[34 : 07] Friends, we need to ask these tough questions individually and as a church. The general health and well-being of our church, the authenticity of gospel renewal, and ultimately the honour of God stands or falls in our answers to these questions.

Let me pray. Lord, your word bites really deeply into us.

Forgive us, I pray. Forgive me, I pray. For the times, oh so many times, far too many times, when I've lost passion to grow in you, but simply wallowed in the security I have in you.

Forgive us, Lord, when we are better described by verse 15 and verse 26 than we are by verses 22, 23, and 24, the fruit of the Spirit.

Forgive us for that, oh Lord. Give us a heart to repent. Give us a heart to go back and revisit those conversations with the people we've spoken to and correct them.

[35 : 36] In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.