

Keep on Growing: Unspiritual Growth - 2nd July 2023

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[0 : 00] Hello. Good morning. We've had some truly inspiring talks these past few weeks, haven't we? Encouraging us to keep growing in our faith.

So today you've got me, and with my teacher background, I thought I'd better do a few corrections. So here we have, keep on not growing. So that's what I'm asking, this simple question.

And supposing you feel you're not growing. Supposing you're not like everyone else, and you don't feel you're growing at all. So, this is entitled, Un-Spiritual Growth and Erratic Discipleship.

Sometimes I think I'm not a very good Christian. I feel like I don't pray enough. I don't read my Bible enough.

I don't share my faith enough. I don't love God enough. I'm not committed enough. And I'm not spiritual enough. So therefore, I'm certainly not growing enough.

[1 : 12] And if we're not careful, we can spend most of our lives worried about what we're not doing, and focusing on our imperfections, rather than on what God has enabled us to do.

So suppose that growing in faith is not as straightforward as it sounds. Supposing it takes us on a journey which is really quite erratic.

This very recent study from the National Bureau of Economic Research, other than my son, I'm not sure you're all into economics that much, but trust me, this is a good bit of research.

It documents a midlife crisis amongst the habits of rich nations. And despite the fact that middle-aged citizens, in all the data collected, are usually close to their peak in job earnings, and they've typically experienced little or no illness, that they reside in some of the safest countries in the world, and they live in the most prosperous area in human history, well, despite all this, they're often experiencing what we term as a midlife crisis.

So this is paradoxical and troubling, because really, it should be the opposite, shouldn't it? The research uses panel and through-time data, and in total, on approximately half a million individuals.

[2 : 43] So it's not light-touch stuff. It shows that starting around age 50, that people are disproportionately more likely to take their own lives, more likely to have trouble sleeping, more likely to become more dependent on alcohol, more likely to feel that life is not worth living, more likely to find it hard to concentrate, or forget things, they're more likely to feel overwhelmed at work, and they're more likely to suffer from disabling headaches.

Now, if you find any of those applied to you, then just know that you're in very good company. The research is not quite sure why this is, and what the possible cause is.

One theory is that when those people were young, in the best of times of the 1970s, when hopes were high, then as the years have passed, they suddenly realize they're living in a society where there's great disappointment, and things are not as good as they hoped they would be.

But what is clear is that many people feel they're not getting anywhere, and they're not growing or prospering as they feel they should.

And you know how it goes. We're not immune to this as Christians, and we should not be surprised if we feel the effects of the society around us.

[4 : 21] Other Christians can often be very unhelpful, urging us to just get on with it, pull yourself together. You should be aiming high, seizing the moment, believing and achieving great things.

There's a whole self-help and mentoring and coaching industry out there that's been built around this kind of thinking. But surely, for everyone, there are at least times in all our lives when being able to get on with it, it just seems so far away, out of reach, a distant dream.

There are times when everything seems flat, and we're moving nowhere. There. Fast. Well, as I said, you're in good company.

Because if we're honest, most of us feel like this either some or most of the time. We think and hope situations could be different. If only we had more faith, we tell ourselves.

If only I trusted God more, then it would be better. But Jesus' very followers, the disciples, often got it wrong and messed up.

[5 : 36] Let's have a look at James and John. Their mother had very definite ideas about how to get on and what should be happening to her sons. Then the mother of Zebedee's sons came to Jesus with her sons and kneeling down, asked a favor of him.

What is it you want? He asked. She said, Grant that one of these two sons of mine may sit at your right hand and the other at your left in your kingdom.

You don't know what you are asking, Jesus said to them. Can you drink the cup I am going to drink?

We can, they answered. Jesus said to them, You will indeed drink from my cup, but to sit at my right or left is not for me to grant.

These places belong to those for whom they have been prepared by my Father. When the ten heard about this, they were indignant with the two brothers.

[6 : 40] Jesus called them together and said, You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them and their high officials exercise authority over them.

Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave.

Just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many. This is all very understandable.

What parent doesn't want the very best for their children? A clear path onward and upward in life. But Jesus rather turns this way of thinking on its head.

Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave. What?

[7 : 43] Be your slave? Surely this is going backwards, not growing at all, isn't it? Despite their ambitions and their total misunderstanding of the kingdom of God, Jesus does not give up on James and John one bit and holds on to them despite their muddled thinking.

Of course, we can always rely on Peter to get it absolutely wrong. Peter declares to Jesus, you are the Christ and appears to be growing in faith in leaps and bounds.

Yet at the very time Jesus needs loyal friends, this happens. Peter sat down with them.

Peter sat down with them. Peter followed at a distance, and when some there had kindled a fire in the middle of the courtyard and had sat down together, Peter sat down with them.

Peter sat down with them. A servant girl saw him seated there in the firelight. She looked closely at him and said, this man was with him. But he denied it.

[8 : 59] Woman, I don't know him, he said. A little later, someone else saw him and said, you also are one of them.

Man, I am not, Peter replied. About an hour later, another asserted, certainly, this fellow is with him, for he is a Galilean.

Peter replied, man, I don't know what you are talking about. Just as he was speaking, the rooster crowed. The Lord turned and looked straight at Peter.

Then Peter remembered the word the Lord had spoken to him. Before the rooster crows today, you will disown me three times. And he went outside and wept bitterly.

Peter bitterly regrets his every word, but it's too late. He's messed up big time. After a long period of anguish, it's not until Jesus has risen from the dead that he restores Peter and brings him back to faith.

[10 : 10] It's certainly not been an easy time and his faith, Peter's faith, comes crashing down. A total disaster. A denial of who he thought he was.

The only answer was to wait. To wait and somehow hold on. Despite what Peter has done, Jesus never gives up on him. He never stops seeing Peter's potential.

After Jesus rises from the dead, Jesus reinstates Peter, asking him three times if Peter loves him and asking him to still feed his sheep.

Despite messing up, Jesus still entrusts Peter with looking after and nurturing other believers. He does. He carries on.

Perhaps you feel you've messed up or have got your priorities wrong or simply don't know where you are going. Of course, we all need to encourage people to grow in faith and we should show them how and encourage them to grow in faith day in and day out.

[11 : 20] Of course we should. But we also know that people will fail and mess up. Jesus said, you shall know the truth and the truth will set you free.

That means we are free indeed to do good or indeed to mess up or simply feel we're not getting anywhere. Plenty of people will have their ideas about what we should be doing but being free in Christ means I'm also free from other people's definitions of what being a grown-up Christian looks like.

I'm going to repeat that. Being free in Christ means that I'm also free from other people's definitions of what being a grown-up Christian looks like.

Take just about any character you like in the Bible and there's story after story about how they messed up. Pick just anyone from all the disciples Abraham, Moses, David and so on.

They all messed up big time. Big time. For some of us that means we feel stuck. We're not going anywhere. Last July I retired from my work in education and I usually get asked so what are you doing now?

[12 : 42] And while I'm doing quite a lot and I've tried out a number of things some of which have just amounted to nothing I'm really feeling if I'm honest quite stuck.

stuck. Stuck. Feeling I'm making little progress in anything. Now there's a brave confession and perhaps one that will be followed by lots of advice.

But the truth is I'm stuck and not for the first time in my life. I remember applying and applying for jobs for almost two years. Getting interviews and being told there was nothing wrong with my application and my interview was great but I just didn't get the job.

I was stuck. Stuck for a long time. It's assumed that if you're stuck in life then you're not doing something right because after all dedicated Christians should never get stuck.

Getting stuck can be the best thing that could happen to us because it forces us to stop. It halts the momentum of our lives and we have no choice but to notice what's around us and we end up searching for Jesus.

[14 : 00] When we're stuck we're much more likely to pay attention to our hunger for God and the longings and yearnings which have stilled and stifled us. Perhaps being stuck is the final low point and we say okay I give up.

We cannot grow without first giving up and letting go. Getting stuck forces us to see the futility of our situation and to put life in perspective so that we can move on.

Here are some principles four non-principles for spiritual growth. In his book Messy Spirituality Christianity for the Rest of Us the author and speaker Mike Iaconelli outlines four non-principles for spiritual growth.

Spirituality where we truly grow is the messed up kind. There are no guarantees in the Christian life except for one. The longing and hunger for Jesus Christ should always be underneath everything we desire.

Okay the longing and hunger for Jesus Christ should always be underneath everything we desire. I found that to be true. I hope you have.

[15 : 16] Here's non-principle number one. Spiritual growth encompasses a lifetime of decisions. You may be familiar with the jargon make a decision for God or turn your back on the past life and turn to Jesus as though that's all that's required.

when the truth is that each and every day is made up of those decisions which draw us closer or indeed move us further away from God.

Our relationship with God is multifaceted and multi-textured. I can feel as though I'm truly Jesus' best friend one minute and then I find myself feeling angry and distant the next.

My hormones feelings thoughts and emotions all come into play. But the more I ask for God's help and guidance for the next decision then the more I grow.

That's why we pray. That's why we have faith no matter what. Each decision is important. Non-principle two.

[16 : 27] Spiritual growth looks different for each of us. If we're honest our growth is not one steady trajectory upwards we often uncover what God is doing in our lives amidst the dust and debris of our busy lives.

This is often erratic arbitrary capricious inconsistent disjointed and irregular. We can't manipulate our growth as so often it's unpredictable.

Perhaps we need to change our language from having spiritual highs and lows from good and bad from blessings and curses to something more sensible like well at this time I'm resting in God.

At this time I'm listening to God. At this time I'm waiting for God I'm starting I'm returning I'm savouring I'm celebrating I'm dancing I'm learning I'm growing.

Non-principle number three give God 60%. We're often told you either follow God or you don't.

[17 : 58] You're committed or you're not. You should give God 100%. But is there really such a thing as 100% commitment? I'm usually pretty alert in the mornings ready to give 100%.

Afternoons start off well but by 4.30 I'm ready for that afternoon nap. I perk up at the mention of food by 6pm. The evening progresses as a gentle demise and they're thinking I'm ready for bed.

Then I get a setting wind around 10pm and start having flashes of inspiration. So warning just be careful when you approach me. One of the privileges of my career as a teacher in school is that you meet many remarkable people.

Sarah not her real name was a star pupil of mine. excellent well organised hard working and brilliant at French a rare thing and wanted to continue to A level.

During her GCSE years she struggled with emotional and mental health issues and suffered from anorexia. At the key time while she was in year 11 she was admitted to 24 hour health care to monitor her situation.

[19 : 21] There was no way at times she could even give 60% to her studies but she was keen to do a French GCSE and her mother asked for work to be sent.

The work was done and it was hoped she could return to school for the exams but this was not to be and in fact she sat the exams in the care facility except that wasn't quite possible because to do a French GCSE you need to do a speaking exam which is recorded.

It needs to be conducted with a registered teacher expert like what I am. So was it just coincidence that the care facility was only a few streets away from where I lived?

Anyway special permission was given and I was able to visit the facility to prepare her and the speaking exam was done. Sarah got a grade B.

Remarkable under the circumstances she was able to return to school for the sixth form and began her A level French course. Except there was something I found out in early September when I got the feedback from the exam board.

[20 : 36] I noticed she had been awarded zero marks for one of her exam papers. A near impossibility for her. After some correspondence the missing exam paper was discovered and by October she had been regraded to A star.

60% or less was the best Sarah could do but it was as though God took that and made it work out somehow.

Do you feel you can give only 60% or less? Then give God that. That is what we're asked to do.

To give what we're able. He'll take it and he'll make something of it. God will show up whatever percentage we give him and that often motivates us to give even more.

Non-principle number four. Reluctant growth is still growth. growth. No matter how much we've grown we still need to grow more.

[21 : 48] No matter how mature we are we never stop maturing and no matter how unspiritual we are as long as we want to grow more Jesus will show up in even the messiest of disciples as we've already seen with Peter, James and John.

This is a story from Mike Iaconelli about a person called Daryl Jenkins. Every month the youth group at River Road Church visited Holcomb Manor, a local nursing home, to hold church services for the residents.

Daryl Jenkins was a reluctant adult helper at the youth group and did not like nursing homes. For a long time it avoided the monthly services.

But when a flu epidemic depleted the group of helpers, Daryl agreed to help with the next month's service as long as he didn't have to do anything. During the service, Daryl felt awkward and out of place.

He leaned against the back wall in between two residents in wheelchairs and just as the service finished and Daryl was thinking about a quick exit, someone grabbed his hand. Startled, he looked down and saw a very old, frail and obviously lonely man in a wheelchair.

[23 : 05] What could Daryl do but hold the man's hand? The man's mouth hung open and his face held no expression. Daryl doubted whether he could hear or see anything.

As everyone began to go home, Daryl realised he didn't want to leave the old man. He'd been left too many times in his own life. Caught somewhat off guard by his feelings, Daryl leaned over and whispered, I'm sorry, I have to leave, but I'll be back, I promise.

Without any warning, the man squeezed Daryl's hand and then let go. Daryl's eyes filled with tears and he grabbed his stuff and started to leave. Inexplicably, he heard himself say to the old man, I love you.

Where did that come from? What's the matter with me? He thought. Daryl returned the next month and the month after that. Each time it was the same routine. Daryl would stand at the back, Oliver would grab his hand, Daryl would say he had to leave and Oliver would squeeze his hand and Daryl would say softly, I love you Mr. Leak.

He'd learned his name, of course, since then. As the months went on, about a week before the whole commander service, Daryl would find himself looking forward to the visit his aged friend.

[24 : 29] On Daryl's sixth visit, the service started but Oliver still hadn't been wheeled out. Daryl didn't feel too concerned at first because it often took the nurses a long time to wheel everyone out to the service.

But halfway into the service, Oliver still hadn't appeared and Daryl became alarmed. He went to the head nurse, I don't see Mr. Leak here today, is he okay?

The nurse asked Daryl to follow her and led him to room 27. Oliver lay in his bed and his eyes closed, his breathing uneven. At 40 years of age, Daryl had never seen someone dying, but he knew that Oliver was near death.

Slowly, he walked to the side of the bed and grabbed Oliver's hand. When Oliver didn't respond, tears filled Daryl's eyes. He knew he might never see Oliver alive again.

He had so much wanted to say to him, but the words just wouldn't come. He stayed with Oliver for about an hour, and then the youth director gently interrupted to say they were leaving.

[25 : 36] Daryl got up to leave and squeezed Mr. Leak's hand for the last time as he said, I'm sorry Oliver, I have to go. I love you. As he unclasped his hand, he felt a squeeze.

Mr. Leak had responded. He had squeezed Daryl's hand. The tears were unstoppable now, and Daryl stumbled towards the door trying to gain his composure.

A young woman was standing at the door. Daryl almost bumped into her. I'm sorry, he said, I didn't see you. It's all right. I've been waiting to see you, she said. I'm Oliver's granddaughter.

He's dying, you know. Yes, I know. I wanted to meet you, she went on. When the doctor said he was dying, I came immediately. We've always been very close.

They said he couldn't talk, but he's been talking to me. Not much, but I know what he's saying. Last night, he woke up. His eyes were bright and alert. He looked straight in the eyes and said, please say goodbye to Jesus for me.

[26 : 38] And then he lay back down and closed his eyes. He caught me off guard and as soon as I gathered my composure, I whispered to him, Grandpa, you don't need to say goodbye to Jesus.

You're going to be with him soon and you can tell him hello. Grandpa struggled to open his eyes again. This time his face lit up with a mischievous smile and he said, as clearly as I'm talking to you, I know, but Jesus comes to see me every month.

And he might not know I've gone. He closed his eyes and hasn't spoken since. I told the nurse what he'd said and she told me about you coming every month, holding his hand, and I wanted to thank you for him, for me.

And well, I never thought of Jesus as being as chubby and bald as you. but I imagine that Jesus is very glad to have you mistaken for him.

I know Oliver is. Thank you. She leaned over and kissed Daryl on the forehead. Oliver Leek died peacefully the next morning.

[27 : 47] If a reluctant follower of Jesus, like Daryl, can be mistaken for Jesus, maybe you and I can be too.

Thank you.