

## **Christian Growth Week 1: Introduction**

### **Logistical matters:**

Please pay your tuition by next week at the latest.

Explain syllabus

Homework: Each week you will be writing a personal response to a reading related to this week's class material. You will also be reading certain passages from Romans related to next week's class material.

Quizzes: You will have three quizzes on the memory verses you have learned thus far.

Exam: You will have an exam that covers the material included on your Exam Review Guide.

Class format: 2 hours; mainly lecture with times for questions; corporate prayer at the end

### **Introductory comment**

The goal of this class is to provide you with a foundation for growing toward spiritual maturity.

Before you can grow spiritually, you must be born spiritually. God will make you His child if you personally receive Jesus as your Savior and Lord (Jn. 1:12).

Once you have been born spiritually, it is God's will for you to grow toward spiritual maturity. Notice how Paul, Peter, and John all speak of the importance of growing to spiritual maturity.

**Eph. 4:13 . . . until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. <sup>14</sup> Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming. <sup>15</sup> Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ.**

**1 Pet. 2:2 Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation, <sup>3</sup> now that you have tasted that the Lord is good.**

**1 Jn. 2:12 I am writing to you, little children, because your sins have been forgiven you for His name's sake. <sup>13</sup> I am writing to you, fathers, because you know Him who has been from the beginning. I am writing to you, young men, because you have overcome the evil one. I have written to you, children, because you know the Father. <sup>14</sup> I have written to you, fathers, because you know Him who has been from the beginning. I have written to you, young men, because you are strong, and the word of God abides in you, and you have overcome the evil one.**

John recognizes that his listeners are at different stages of spiritual growth

(little children, young men, fathers) and that they have different levels of understanding and needs. He calls his listeners to move toward maturity.

We begin by asking three important orienting questions about spiritual growth/maturity.

### **What is the *context* of spiritual growth/maturity?**

Spiritual maturity is one stage of God's plan of salvation ("deliverance;" "rescue") from sin through Jesus. The Bible uses different terms to describe these three stages. Here are three common terms:

*Justification* refers to the point in time (DOT) when you first entrust yourself Christ and are permanently delivered from sin's *penalty*. What other terms do we use for this stage? (conversion, being saved, being reborn, receiving Christ, etc.)

*Glorification* refers to the point in time (DOT) when Jesus returns and delivers you forever from sin's *presence*. What other terms do we use for this stage? (going to heaven, eternal life, entering God's kingdom, etc.) The Bible teaches that all who have been justified will be glorified (Rom. 8:30).

*Sanctification* is the ongoing process (JAGGED, UPWARD LINE) that begins at justification and ends at glorification—by which you are gradually delivered from sin's *power*. What other terms do we use for this stage? (spiritual growth, maturing spiritually, etc.)

Let's look at some passages that describe these three stages:

**Phil. 1:6\* being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.**

"He who began a good work in you" refers to justification.

"Until the day of Christ Jesus" refers to glorification.

"Will (continue to) perfect it" refers to sanctification. Paul is emphatic that true Christians will be perfected when Christ returns, and that until that day God will continue to initiate our sanctification (see Phil. 2:13).

**Rom. 5:1 Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, <sup>2</sup> through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. <sup>3</sup> Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; <sup>4</sup> perseverance, character; and character, hope. <sup>5</sup> And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us.**

5:1,2a refers to justification—God has declared us to be in right standing with Him, so we are reconciled to Him.

5:2b refers to glorification—we are excited about the certainty of seeing God in His glory and sharing His glory.

5:3-5 refers to sanctification— God is at work even through our sufferings to transform us, and during this process He will personally encourage us with His love.

**1 Jn. 3:1 How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are! The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him. <sup>2</sup> Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. <sup>3</sup> Everyone who has this hope in him purifies himself, just as he is pure.**

3:1 refers to justification—the “great love that the Father *has bestowed* on us, that we should be called children of God.”

3:2 refers to glorification—“it has not yet appeared what *we shall be* . . . when he appears, we shall be like him.”

3:3 refers to sanctification—“everyone who has this hope *purifies* himself, just as he is pure.”

Phil. 3:12-14 provides us with an important perspective as we seek to grow to spiritual maturity—a perspective that includes both *optimism* and *realism*.

**Phil. 3:12 Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. <sup>13</sup> Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, <sup>14</sup> I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.**

On the one hand, we can be *optimistic* because we can keep growing throughout our Christian lives. We can experience increasing change and healing in our knowledge of God, our character, our emotional and psychological and relational lives, etc. So we should never accept the status quo, but keep pressing forward.

But on the other hand, we need to be *realistic* because we will receive the total change and healing that we want only when Jesus returns. Until then, we are in a battle with Satan and our own fallen natures. So we should not expect or claim perfection in any of the above areas.

What is your tendency? Do you tend to be realistic about your sin and brokenness, but pessimistic about God’s ability to change you? Do you tend to be optimistic about God’s ability to change you, but naïve about the depth of your sin? Know yourself!

### **What does spiritual growth/maturity look like?**

“Deliverance from the power of sin” is an accurate, but negative, answer. The Bible also gives us a positive answer. In Jn. 15:1-12\*\*, Jesus uses a metaphor from agriculture to provide a positive description of spiritual growth.

**John 15:1-12\*\* “I am the true vine, and My Father is the vinedresser. <sup>2</sup> Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit, He takes away; and every *branch* that bears fruit, He prunes it**

so that it may bear more fruit. <sup>3</sup> You are already clean because of the word which I have spoken to you. <sup>4</sup> Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself unless it abides in the vine, so neither *can* you unless you abide in Me.

<sup>5</sup> I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me and I in him, he bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing. <sup>6</sup> If anyone does not abide in Me, he is thrown away as a branch and dries up; and they gather them, and cast them into the fire and they are burned. <sup>7</sup> If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. <sup>8</sup> My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit, and *so* prove to be My disciples.

<sup>9</sup> Just as the Father has loved Me, I have also loved you; abide in My love. <sup>10</sup> If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love; just as I have kept My Father's commandments and abide in His love. <sup>11</sup> These things I have spoken to you so that My joy may be in you, and *that* your joy may be made full. <sup>12</sup> "This is My commandment, that you love one another, just as I have loved you. (NASB)

Notice how multi-faceted this description is:

*The heart of spiritual growth is a personal love-trust relationship with Jesus.* Although a vine and its branches are impersonal, Jesus uses personal language to describe our relationship with Him.

"Abide in Me and I in you . . . abide in my love" (Jn. 15:4,9). "Abide" means "make your home in." The habitual dwelling place of our hearts should be relating personally to Jesus, trusting His love for us.

"Apart from me you can do nothing . . . Ask . . ." (Jn. 15:5,7). This means that we are to keep depending on Him to provide our spiritual life, just as a vine provides biological life for its branches.

So the heart of spiritual growth is this love-trust relationship with Jesus. It is not how much biblical knowledge we gain, or how much moral reform we undergo, or even how much we serve other people. As important as all of these are (see below), if we make them more important than our love-trust relationship with Jesus, we will not be what Jesus wants us to be (Rev. 2:1-5). Phil. 3:10 and Jn. 17:3 also teach that knowing Jesus is the foundational goal of the Christian life.

At the same time, a genuine love-trust relationship with Jesus is not only a private matter of the heart. *This relationship develops and manifests itself in concrete ways that you and others can recognize.* (This is the argument of 1 John.) It involves:

A growing understanding of every major area of life from Jesus' perspective (Jn. 15:7 – "If My words abide in you"). You can't know Jesus well without learning from the Bible more about who He is and what He has done for you. So there is a *biblical knowledge* aspect to spiritual growth.

A growing transformation of your character to God’s moral will (Jn. 15:10 – “If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love”). You can’t know Jesus well without trusting and responding to His authoritative direction. So there is an *obedience* aspect to spiritual growth.

A growing ability to love others the way Jesus loves us (Jn. 15:12 – “Love one another, just as I have loved you”). You can’t know Jesus well without loving those whom He loves. So there is a *community* aspect to spiritual growth.

*The ultimate purpose and motive of this love relationship with Jesus is to glorify God* (Jn. 15:8 – “by this is my Father glorified, that you bear much fruit”). To glorify God is to honor and treasure God above everything and everyone else, and to represent him well to others so that may be attracted to do the same.

This is why Jesus implies that the fruit is not only the change in our own lives as described above (see Gal. 5:22,23), but also being agents of this same change in others’ lives (Jn. 15:16 – “Go and bear fruit”). This is why Jesus taught us to pray giving ultimate honor to God and wanting God’s kingdom to extend to others (Matt. 6:9,10).

Beware of trying to use Jesus as your personal Genie to fulfill your agenda! This is our natural tendency—to relate to Jesus as a consumer, to view Him as our consultant, life-coach, etc. Beware of using your spiritual growth as a means to glorifying yourself!

*Pursuing this love relationship with Jesus will result in increasing joy* (Jn. 15:11 – “These things I have spoken to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be made full”). One of Satan’s favorite lies is that we must choose between God’s will (which glorifies Him) and our will (which fulfills us). But we need not worry that seeking to glorify God will result in our misery or disappointment. Because we were created to glorify God, increasing joy will be a wonderful result of this pursuit.

### **What is the *foundation* for spiritual growth/maturity?**

You can see from Jn. 15 that the key to our spiritual growth is our personal union with Jesus. Jesus is the One who supplies all of the life that we need in order to bear fruit. It is our connection with Jesus that makes His life available to us. This is why those who are not connected with Jesus are lifeless (Jn. 15:6).

The New Testament uses many other metaphors to describe this union.

We are “adopted” into God’s family as His children. Jesus tells us to relate to God as our “Abba” (“Papa” Matt. 6:9). Paul tells us we have been adopted by God and that His Spirit helps us to relate to God as “Abba” (Rom. 8:15). John speaks of the love the Father has lavished on us by calling us His children (1 Jn. 3:1).

We are “betrothed” to Jesus as His Bride. Rev. 19:7-9 speaks of Christ’s return as the day when he takes Christians to be His “Bride.” Paul says he betrothed us to Christ as our “Husband,” that we might have a simplicity and purity of devotion to Him (2 Cor. 11:2,3). Paul also speaks of Christ as our “Husband” who gave Himself up for us and who is sanctifying us for the day of our “wedding” (Eph. 5:25-27).

This unbreakable union of love is a free gift that Jesus purchased through His death. It is permanently forged by God's Spirit the moment we entrust ourselves to Jesus.

**Eph. 4:13,14\* In Him, you also, after listening to the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation—having also believed, you were sealed in Him with the Holy Spirit of promise, 14 who is given as a pledge of our inheritance, with a view to the redemption of God's own possession, to the praise of His glory.**

This union is two-fold:

1:13 says that the Holy Spirit seals us in Christ. This means that we are identified with Jesus so that what is His becomes legally ours. If a rich man marries an indebted girl, their legal union means that his wealth is now hers. In the same way, because we are legally united with Jesus, His spiritual riches become ours! Is Jesus righteous in His Father's eyes? So are we because we are in Him. Is Jesus heir to His Father's kingdom? So are we because we are in Him. Many, many other New Testament passages explain the spiritual wealth we have received because we are "in Christ." Paul uses this term in this sense 126 times in his letters. The New Living Translation translates this phrase "united with Christ" to emphasize this personal union. We will study this aspect of our union with Jesus in Week 3.

1:14 says that the Holy Spirit is given to us as God's pledge. This means that God's Spirit indwells our spirits so that we may know Jesus personally, and so that we might become more like Him. When two people become married, they experience a union of personal intimacy which can result in children who bear their likeness. In a similar way, God's Spirit enables us to experience a personal intimacy with Jesus which makes us more like Him. We will study more about this aspect of our union with Jesus in Week 4.

You are now permanently in Christ, and Christ is now permanently in you! This union is the sure foundation upon which all spiritual growth occurs. Next week, we will explore how deeply sinful we are because this knowledge is necessary for healthy spiritual growth. But because of the good news that we are securely united with Christ, we can bear to hear this bad news—and it will only make us grateful for and dependent on Him!

## Memory Verses

Phil. 1:6\* - God will ultimately complete the good work of salvation that He began when we believed in Christ.

Jn. 15:1-12\*\* - Spiritual growth is the result of an ongoing love-trust relationship with Jesus.

Eph. 1:13,14\* - We are united with Christ through the Holy Spirit the moment we believe the gospel.

## Assignment

Lovelace. *Renewal as a Way of Life*. "The God-Centered Life" Read and answer questions.

