

Our Challenge: “But Grow Up in Every Way”

In the book by J.M. Barrie, which became both a musical play and a movie, a young boy named Peter Pan declares he will never grow up because in his view, grownups never have fun. But when Wendy meets Peter, she finds herself falling in love with him. In the moonlit forest of Neverland, she confronts him over his all-play, no-commitment attitude. She asks, “Peter, what are your real feelings?”

“Feelings?” he asks.

“Yes,” Wendy replies, “What do you feel? Happiness? Sadness? Anger? Love?”

“Love?” Peter responds, “I’ve never heard of it.”

“Oh, I think you have, Peter.” Says Wendy, “I daresay you’ve felt it yourself... for something, or someone.”

“Never!” snaps Peter, “Even the sound of it offends me.”

Wendy reaches for Peter in a loving gesture but he runs away, shouting, “Why do you spoil everything? We have fun, don’t we? I taught you to fight and to fly. What more could there be?”

“There is so much more,” she answers.

“What?” Peter asks, “What else is there?”

Wendy says, “I think it becomes clearer when [we] grow up.”¹

Do you know any Peter Pans? Even among Christians you can find people who wonder if there’s more to being a Christian than “being saved”? The apostle Peter wrote: (2 Peter 3:18)

But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. ...

So, technically, we’re commanded to grow. But what exactly IS spiritual growth? And why should I want it? And how do I do it? Let’s take these questions one at a time. First...

I. What Is Spiritual Growth?

Our eighth Affirmation of Faith focuses on spiritual maturity. It says:

CHRISTIAN CONDUCT – We believe that each Christian should live for the glory of God and the well-being of their fellowmen; that their conduct should be blameless before the world; that they should be faithful stewards of their possessions and that they should seek to realize for themselves and others, the full stature of maturity in Christ.

(2 Cor. 9:6-8; Eph. 4:11-16; Phil. 2:14-16; Col. 3:17-23; 1 Thess. 5:17-18)

Last week we talked about *regeneration*. Another Bible word for it is *justification*. It’s something that happens once, like being born. It’s not a process; it’s a point in time, an event. One second you’re unborn, the next you’re born!

Spiritual growth is a process, not an event. It carries the theological term of *sanctification*. Paul urges the Christians in Thessalonica to continue in that process:

Finally, then, brothers, we ask and urge you in the Lord Jesus, that as you received from us how you ought to walk and to please God ... that you do so more and more. ... For this is the will of God, your sanctification ... (1 Thess. 4:1, 3)

And Eph. 4:13-15 points us to the goal...

... until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, so

that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes. Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ ...

What is spiritual growth? It's the process of growing up, in every way, until we attain the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. Some Bible translations say, ...*attaining the full measure of perfection found in Christ*. You know what? The word *perfection* does not appear in this verse. You can be mature without being perfect. Spiritual growth is becoming mature like Jesus, not perfect like Him.

So, this leads us to our next question, which is: "And why should I want that?"

II. Why Should I Want to Grow Up?

In the earliest renditions of the play *Peter Pan*, it carried the subtitle, "*The Boy Who Wouldn't Grow Up*." The musical version, of course, includes the song, "*I Won't Grow Up!*"

*I won't grow up,
I don't want to wear a ti.,
And a serious expression
In the middle of July.
And if it means I must prepare
To shoulder burdens with a worried air,
I'll never grow up, never grow up, never grow up,
Not me!*²

This didn't use to be much of a problem. Children's greatest desire used to be to grow up and move out of the house, get a job, and become independent. Today, being "childlike" is not only tolerated, but in many parts of our culture, actually pursued. Some seem to have embraced Peter Pan's creed.

Now to be fair, Jesus did say that there are some traits of children that adults should emulate. For example, He said we should trust God, have faith like a child (Matt. 18:5). But Jesus was also speaking by the Holy Spirit in 1 Corinthians where Paul wrote:

When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I gave up childish ways. (1 Cor. 13:11)

So, what does it mean to be "childlike"? According to this passage, it means you have a distinct way of speaking, thinking, and reasoning. And what is that way?

When I directed the children's ministry here, I gave a book to every preschool teacher that described the characteristics of preschool children. The title of the book was, "The World is Me!" That's the way preschoolers live, right? It's all about me!! "I don't want to wear that, I want to wear this. I don't want to eat that, I want to eat this. I don't want to go there, I want to stay here!" Living with a preschooler is great training for pre-law students. You are constantly interpreting, explaining, and then trying to enforce the law! Can I get an "Amen" from somebody??? Thank you.

If you are or ever have been the parent of a preschooler, you actually should have a great empathy for God, our heavenly Father. You see, why do you as a parent want your children to "grow up"? Is it just for your own mental health? No! You want your children to grow up because you know if they don't, they will fail in school, fail in sports, fail in a job, fail in marriage ... fail in life! You know they will never have a successful, satisfying life living like children.

Chapter eight of Romans is a truly incredible chapter. It has all the traits of a lawyer's closing argument. He says, *'There is therefore...'* Whenever you see the word "therefore," you should ask yourself, "What's that 'therefore,' there for?" Paul is beginning the summary statement for his argument that began back in chapter 3! It's his argument for the value of salvation. (Rom. 8:1)

There is therefore NOW no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

For five chapters, culminating in chapter 7, Paul describes the cosmic battle for control of the soul of every human being. A battle to the death! A battle in which we are out-manned, out-gunned, and for which we are completely unprepared. A battle in which he exclaims in the next-to-last verse of the previous chapter, "Oh...

Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? (Rom. 7:24)

Have you come to that place of awareness yet? Awareness that, even though you asked Jesus to forgive your sins, even though you know that you are His child, you realize your war with sin is not over. The apostle Paul in Rom. 7 is speaking as a Christ follower! Yet he still acknowledges: (Rom. 7:18)

... For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out.

What battle are you in right now? How well are you dealing with the fear that this coronavirus has created? The fear may actually be more a threat to your health than the virus. Dr. Bruce Lipton is a cell biologist. He was a research fellow at Stanford University, where the focus of his work was the human immune system. In a recent interview, he stated that fear is a greater threat to your health than the coronavirus itself. Listen...

"Stress hormones when released into the body stop all functions not associated from escaping a threat ... From the first moment fear hits, stress hormones are released and begin redirecting the body's energy. This causes blood vessels to constrict pushing blood to extremities in preparation for running ... The same system can incapacitate the immune system by experiencing emotional stress associated with watching negative news stories or losing one's job ... The more fear you throw in, the greater the stress, the more disempowerment we have ... the more we shut down the immune system and we invite problems ... Once the immune system is impaired by fear and stress the body is more susceptible to an illness, such as COVID-19."³

Why should you want to grow up spiritually? Because maturity in Christ is the only way for you to live a life that makes your heart sing. And how exactly does that work? Let's go back to Rom. 8 where we see...

III. The Three Keys to Spiritual Growth

If you want to get and stay healthy physically, there are some basic rules you need to follow, right? You need to eat healthy, exercise, avoid germs and deadly viruses, etc. We all know this to be true. But do you know that the same is true if you want to get and stay spiritually healthy? Rom. 8 gives us three important keys to growing strong and healthy spiritually. These three keys are encapsulated in three phrases. The first phrase is in verse 3, *"For God has done."* Beginning in verse 2, it says ... (Rom. 8:2-3)

For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death. For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. ...

The first key to spiritual growth is understanding that it is not built on something you have done but on something "God has done." God has done something that even His perfect law could not do. It wasn't the law's fault. It was our fault. Once humans sinned, we no longer were able to keep the law perfectly. So, getting and staying healthy spiritually isn't something you or I

can do. But God has made it possible by something He has done: He sent His Son. Knowing that your spiritual growth is made possible by God and not you is the first key to growing spiritually.

The second key to spiritual growth is having the right mindset. The phrase is “set the mind,” and there are only two options. Either you set your mind on the flesh or on the Spirit.

For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. (Rom. 8:5)

The word translated ‘*mind,*’ refers to more than just what you think. Greek Scholar, Charles Hodge, explains it this way:

The word [mind] has a wide meaning. It expresses any form of mental activity, any exercise of the intellect, will, or affections ... [The Greek word used here refers to] the objects on which their hearts are set, and to which their lives are devoted. ⁴

Romans 8:5 describes two vastly different groups of people. Both are just as alive today as in Paul’s day. One group says, “I need to follow my heart. My heart wants something that the Bible says is wrong. But how can it be wrong when it feels so right?” The other group says, “My heart and even my mind turn me one way. But it’s not what the Bible says is right. Since I believe God wrote the Bible, that means my heart and mind must be wrong. No matter what I feel, I’m doing what God says.”

Our hearts, our minds, without the guidance of the Holy Spirit, will never lead us to a good place, only a dark place. This is the truth that Rom. 8:6 is proclaiming:

For to set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace.

This is a critical, foundational, spiritual law. For you to grow to maturity, the Spirit of God must have authority over your intellect, will, and affections. Only then will you know God’s peace and the good life God has always intended for you. This is the path to maturity.

The third phrase we find that will lead us to spiritual growth is “led by the Spirit.”

For if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. (Rom. 8:13-14)

But in real life, how does this work? Pastor John Ortberg likens our moving toward spiritual maturity to trying to cross the ocean in a boat. Some people think it’s all up to them, like trying to cross the ocean in a rowboat. Others think it’s all up to God, so they see themselves sitting on a raft doing nothing while God mysteriously moves them. Ortberg explains it this way:

Neither trying nor drifting are effective in bringing about spiritual transformation. A better image is the sailboat, which if it moves at all, it’s a gift of the wind. We can’t control the wind, but a good sailor discerns where the wind is blowing and adjusts the sails accordingly.

Working with the Holy Spirit, which Jesus likened to the wind in John 3, means we have a part in discerning the winds, in knowing the direction we need to go, and in training our sails to catch the breezes that God provides. That’s true transformation. ⁵

This third phrase, led by the Spirit, is also found in Gal. 5 where we are told: (Gal.5:16, 17-18, 22-23)

But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other ... But if you are led by the Spirit, you are

not under the law. ... But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law.

Is the wind of the Spirit blowing in your life right now? You might say, “Is it blowing? It’s blowing all right, but from a very bad direction!” The greatest curse for a skilled sailor is not a strong wind, but no wind. With the Word of God as your map and compass, and the Spirit as the wind in your sails, pull up the anchor. God is saying, “It’s time to grow up. Drop Peter Pan at the dock. Let’s have an adventure!” Let’s pray...

¹ Peter Pan (*Universal*, 2003) based on the novel by J. M. Barrie, *Peter and Wendy* (London: Hodder&Stoughton, 1911)

² Carolyn Leigh, *I Won't Grow Up!*, musical *Peter Pan*, 1954

³ www.coasttocoastam/show/2020/04/10 - Dr. Bruce Lipton, associate professor of Anatomy at University of Wisconsin School of Medicine, Research Fellow at Stanford's School of Medicine (1987-1992)

⁴ Charles Hodge, D.D. , *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1960), p. 255

⁵ John Ortberg, “True (and False) Transformation,” *Leadership* (Summer, 2002), p. 104