

Vision 20/20

*“Have you never read in the Scriptures: “The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord’s doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes”?”
(Matthew 21:42 ESV)*

*“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.”
(Acts 1:8 ESV)*

*“Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.”
(Matthew 25:13 ESV)*

Grow

November 10th, 2019

2 Corinthians 3:18

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Introduction:

Good morning church! I'd like to invite you to open your Bibles this morning to 2 Corinthians 3:18; that's on page 965 in your pew Bible. This is the CLASSICAL TEXT on the doctrine of SANCTIFICATION. Today we are looking at the question of how people grow – and we're also going to be asking the question – why does it matter whether or not saved people grow? We'll start with 2 Corinthians 3:18 – but then we'll zoom out and look at several other New Testament texts that help us answer these very important questions.

Hear now the Word of the Lord:

“And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.” (2 Corinthians 3:18 ESV)

This is the Word of the Lord – thanks be to God!

How Do Saved People Grow?

Well, as I said, this is a great place for us to start this morning. This text supplies the two most important answers to the question: how do saved people grow. The first of course is this: saved people grow by the grace of God.

1. By the grace of God

The end of verse 18 says: “this comes from THE LORD who is the Spirit.”

So growth is always a miracle of God!

Even though there are things for us to DO – and we'll get to those in just a minute – at the end of the day growth is ALWAYS a gift from God.

The Apostle Paul was always careful to put the emphasis on God when he was talking about Christian growth – regardless of whether he was talking about the growth of a church or the growth of an individual. In 1 Corinthians 3:6-7 – when talking about the growth of the church in Corinth he said:

“I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth.” (1 Corinthians 3:6–7 ESV)

He said the same thing when talking about his own growth as an individual. In

“But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me.” (1 Corinthians 15:10 ESV)

So he tells the story of his own growth by STARTING and ENDING with the grace of God – and that's exactly how it should be.

Yes, there are things for us to do.

Yes, we need to work hard at those things.

But at the end of the day if God didn't supply the grace to work and if God didn't bless our efforts and initiatives then none of that would matter in the least. It is the Lord who supplies seed for sowing, water for growing and strength unto harvest – THANKS BE TO GOD.

And so we must begin there.

But then – in keeping with the Bible we must move on from there and speak about the things that Christians are supposed to be DOING. In 2 Corinthians 3:18 Paul says that all of this GROWTH – all of this change happens AS PEOPLE ARE BEHOLDING CHRIST.

2. By beholding Christ

Specifically he says that we are beholding the glory of God – but then in the next chapter he tells us what he means by that. Look at 2 Corinthians 4:6. He says:

For God, who said, “Let light shine out of darkness,” has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God **in the face of Jesus Christ.**” (2 Corinthians 4:6 ESV)

So we SEE the GLORY OF GOD – we see all of God's attributes, qualities and beauty – when we gaze upon the face of Jesus Christ. And as we see it – as we behold it – the Bible says, we are changed by one degree of glory to the next.

Alright – so how do we do that?

The most obvious answer of course is – by reading the Bible.

Jesus said:

“You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me” (John 5:39 ESV)

The bible is about me, Jesus says. Or even better – the Bible testifies to me. That’s why Martin Luther said that Scripture is the cradle wherein Christ is laid. The Old Testament anticipates Christ and the New Testament EXPLICATES Christ. So wherever you go in the Bible – Old Testament or New it is supposed to be pointing you towards the person and work of Christ. That is the FOCAL POINT.

And according to Paul, as you follow the direction of the Bible – as you direct your gaze to Jesus Christ – you will be changed. You will grow. You will be SANCTIFIED by one degree of glory to the next.

Jesus PRAYED for this to happen. In John 17, which is often referred to as “The High Priestly Prayer Of Jesus” – Jesus PRAYED for this process to WORK in your life. John 17:17 says:

“Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth.” (John 17:17 ESV)

Isn’t that amazing? Have you ever thought of that? We often talk about the important of YOU praying before you read the Bible – and that is true. The Bible encourages that and even PROVIDES some prayers to help you with that:

“Open my eyes, that I may behold wondrous things out of your law.” (Psalm 119:18 ESV)

That’s a great prayer to pray before you open your Bible – but even better than that is the fact that JESUS has already prayed for you before you open your Bible – isn’t that amazing? Jesus has PRAYED that as you read the Word of God you will be changed into the same image as Jesus Christ – that’s what “sanctification” means. It means to move in the direction of holiness. It means to become more and more like Christ. Jesus prayed that this would happen as you read the Word of God – so obviously that is a hugely important part of this process.

It is also important that you RESPOND in a worshipful way. BEHOLDING CHRIST is not merely a matter of seeing. Behold – is a worship word, isn’t it? You can see and not BEHOLD. To behold is to see and consider in a worshipful manner.

Seeing like that CHANGES YOU. No matter what you are looking at.

The bible says that no matter what you LOOK AT THAT WAY – no matter you worship – the mere PROCESS of BEHOLDING – the MERE ACT of worshipping AFFECTS and CHANGES human beings. Psalm 135:15-18 says that very thing:

¹⁵ The idols of the nations are silver and gold, the work of human hands.

¹⁶ They have mouths, but do not speak; they have eyes, but do not see;

¹⁷ they have ears, but do not hear, nor is there any breath in their mouths.

¹⁸ Those who make them become like them, so do all who trust in them. (Psalm 135:15–18 ESV)

Do you see that? Even though the idols of the pagans were not REAL – they were not actually gods – even still – the mere act of lifting your face to another entity and affirming that entity as powerful and good – giving worshipful attention to ANYTHING is transformative – for good or ill.

People become what they look at, focus on and affirm.

People are chameleons.

We were MADE TO CHANGE. We were made to REFLECT. This reality is actually hardwired into the human species. Remember – we were created to be a priesthood – we talked about that last week. A priest is a go between. A priest is a conduit. Meaning we are supposed to reflect and transmit. That's how we are made. Remember Moses went up the mountain and SAW God and it CHANGED HIM. His face STORED and REFLECTED what he saw.

Seeing God – CHANGED HIM.

That's a human thing. Whatever you see changes you. Whatever you focus on changes you. Whatever you affirm and identify as good changes you.

So be careful what you look at.

And make sure that you are looking at Jesus! Because when you hear a story about Jesus or listen to a teaching from Jesus or contemplate a miracle of Jesus – and you AFFIRM THAT – YOU AMEN THAT in your Spirit – you say – YES LORD! That's how it should be! That's how humanity is supposed to function! That is lovely! That is righteous! That is merciful! That is beautiful! When you say those things – when you look at and AMEN those things there is ACTUAL, life changing POWER in that.

Worship is like a telescope that actually TAKES some of what it sees and transfers it into the one who is seeing.

It really does ADJUST your mind. It really does REFINE your thinking. It really does AFFECT YOUR PERCEPTION – and even your appearance.

It changes you by one degree of glory to the next. That's the main energy – the main mechanism for Christian sanctification and growth.

But as I said, I want to zoom out and take note of a few other things the Bible mentions that participate in this process. We've talked about the grace of God, we've talked about the power of worship and attention, and now we need to talk about the necessity of effort and discipline.

3. By effort and discipline

Theologians often distinguish between one handed works and two handed works. According to the theologians, salvation is a one handed work – meaning that it is something that God does for us and to us. We don't help – because we were dead in our trespasses and sins and if life has taught me anything it is that

DEAD PEOPLE are terribly unhelpful. Amen? Amen. So we didn't help with that. The Gospel is the Good News of what God has DONE FOR US through the life and death of Jesus Christ. We just receive that as grace through faith – that's a one handed work. But sanctification is a TWO HANDED WORK – meaning that there is something for God to do and something for us to do. And some people work harder at their part than others – so effort actually does matter.

The Apostle Peter certainly thought so. He said:

“For this very reason, **make every effort** to supplement your faith with virtue, and virtue with knowledge, ⁶ and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with steadfastness, and steadfastness with godliness, ⁷ and godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love. ⁸ For if these qualities are yours and are increasing, they keep you from being ineffective or unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.” (2 Peter 1:5–8 ESV)

Did you hear that?

Make every effort.

EFFORT is not a bad thing – you just have to know where to put it.

Effort is bad if you are trying to EARN your salvation. But effort is good if you are trying to grow up in Christ. Peter said that and Paul said that too. He told young Timothy:

“train yourself for godliness; ⁸ for while bodily training is of some value, godliness is of value in every way, as it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come.” (1 Timothy 4:7–8 ESV)

So Paul encourages this young brother saying: “Become an Olympic Calibre Christian.”

TRAIN YOURSELF in GODLINESS.

Are you doing that?

It's hard work. It means getting up a little earlier than you'd like to. It means doing a little less of what is easy and a little more of what is hard. It takes effort – and endurance.

Change doesn't happen over-night.

I heard a famous athlete say recently: “Champions do every day what losers do only once in a while¹.”

That's mean – but true.

Champions are people who do the right thing every day – not once in a while. Champions have OLYMPIC LEVEL HABITS – that's what he is saying and it takes a while to develop those kind of habits. In his book “How To Grow” Darryl Dash tells us that:

¹ Kenny Smith.

“According to a study published in the *European Journal of Social Psychology*, it actually takes an average of two months (sixty-six days) for a new behavior to become automatic. The actual time depends on a number of factors, including the behavior, person, and circumstances. It can take anywhere from 18 to 254 days for people to form a new habit.”²

So you have to TRY for a long time before hard, useful things become habits. But that’s how you develop Olympic level anything.

Let’s apply that to reading your Bible – one of the things you need to do to grow. If you are just reading the Bible whenever you can or whenever it strikes your fancy you will never become a trained and mature and prevailing Christian. Remember – elite athletes don’t jog or work out whenever it strikes their fancy. They get up every morning at 5 am and hit the gym. They have HABITS of physical discipline. Paul says that the same principle applies in the spiritual life. You have to read the Bible for 66 days in a row – according to the *European Journal of Social Psychology*, for it to become a life-long habit.

That’s hard work.

That takes EFFORT and DISCIPLINE over a sustained period of time.

But that’s what it takes to GROW.

And that’s why some people are growing faster than others – and that’s why some people are hardly growing in their faith at all. Effort and discipline matter.

And then fourthly, as we survey the New Testament we see that people grow through the encouragement of others.

4. By the encouragement of others

We can be brief here because we talked about this last week. The Epistle to the Hebrews says:

“And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works,²⁵ not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.” (Hebrews 10:24–25 ESV)

We come to church – we gather together – not just so that we can grow – that is important – but we also come together in order to help each other grow. The Apostle tells us to STIR ONE ANOTHER UP – to STIMULATE ONE ANOTHER’S GROWTH and SANCTIFICATION.

So not only is effort required of you – but effort is required of us. We need to work hard to make sure that you are growing – and that works BEGINS with us getting out of bed and making it a priority to be here. To state the obvious, we can’t help people grow if we’re are not here. So we need to come. We need to make this meeting a priority. For ourselves and for one another - because, according to the Bible, that’s how people grow.

² Darryl Dash, *How To Grow*, (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2018), 101.

And then fifthly, and definitely not intuitively, the Bible also seems to say, that people grow by submitting to authority.

5. By submitting to authority

Now, I know I need to be careful here – but I also need to be faithful here and the Bible says that human leaders are one of the things that God uses to help people grow. We see that everywhere in the Bible – consider for example Ephesians 4:11-13 where Paul says:

“And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers,¹² to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ,¹³ 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” (Ephesians 4:11-13 ESV)

There Paul explicitly LINKS human leaders with the outcome of Christian maturity. God gave LEADERS TO EQUIP the saints – FOR BUILDING UP THE BODY OF CHRIST – toward the end of our MATURITY and FULLNESS IN CHRIST.

Leaders are given by God to help people grow!

We need prophets and apostles to point us to the real Jesus and we need evangelists to lead us to repentance and faith and we need pastors and teachers to preach, correct, rebuke and encourage – all of that matters and all of that helps us to grow.

And fighting against that – resenting that – running away from that – will not be helpful for you. Hebrews 13:17 says that:

“Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you.” (Hebrews 13:17 ESV)

Brothers and sisters, if we run away from human authority – if we refuse the application of this tool to our sanctification process then we are only hurting ourselves. There are certain sins that we cannot see – like cancerous moles growing on our backs – we can't see those things – and so we need the application of pressure from the outside.

We have blindspots and we have STRONGHOLDS – and those things need to be overcome – and those things CAN ONLY BE OVERCOME through the agency of God-given human leaders.

We all need it. (Camp story if time)

God would not give this if we did not need this.

So let me be super practical here – if you don't feel like you can trust the leaders here at this church to help you grow – to teach you and to guide you and to provide some much needed outside perspective and pressure – if you don't trust the leaders here to do that – then for the sake of your own soul – you should leave and submit to a church that has leaders that you can trust.

Because you need this. We all need this. God wouldn't give it if we didn't need it. But he does give it – so we do need it. So you've got to go find it. People grow by submitting to godly leadership.

And then lastly, according to the Bible, people grow:

6. By enduring suffering, hardship and trials

Paul talks about this in 2 Corinthians 1. He says:

“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, ⁴ who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God.” (2 Corinthians 1:3–4 ESV)

Do you see that?

According to Paul, God may ordain certain trials for you – certain afflictions – in order to equip you to minister effectively to other people.

God may ordain a season of your life when you are under the power of a devastating addiction. So that he can rescue you – so that you can EXPERIENCE HIS POWER and DELIVERANCE and then turn around and minister that power to other people who are in desperate need.

We know that to be true – we benefit from that in our church. We have addictions counsellors here who know personally and experientially what they are talking about.

And it also true that God may – and often does - ordain experiences of sickness, tragedy and loss so that he may equip us as a people to minister to those who are hurting.

This past Monday at staff meeting Shara Aldom gave a book report. We assign summer reading to all the staff and then they review the books and tell the rest of us us how these resources can be helpful. Shara read a book called “What Grieving People Wish You Knew About What Really Helps And Really Hurts” by Nancy Guthrie. Nancy Guthrie and her husband lost two children in their infancy – they had the worst thing ever in human life happen to them twice, so this sister knows of what she speaks. And Shara knows of what she speaks. She has had loss in her life too and so it was very helpful for us to be equipped by her – and by this book, because we want to GROW as individuals in our care for and support of hurting people. And this isn't stuff you can learn at seminary. You have to learn it by going through it or being taught by someone else who has.

That's how God takes care of his people. That's how we helps us grow.

People grow - by the grace of God.

People grow – by beholding Christ.

People grow by making an effort.

People grow by receiving encouragement.

People grow by submitting to authority.

And people grow by being brought by God through fiery trials and afflictions.

Now I told you off the top that we were going to try and answer two questions. How do people grow and why does it matter whether or not people grow? We've given most of our time to the first question but I do want to spend a few minutes looking at the second.

Why Does It Matter Whether Or Not People Grow?

If you have been tracking through our whole Mission and Vision Series then you know we are on the home stretch here. Last week we started asking the question: How Can I Get Involved? We talked last week about the importance of gathering. It matters whether or not you are here. And today our job was to talk about GROWTH – our mission after all is to make disciples so obviously it matters whether or not you are growing.

Our JOB is to make sure that you are growing.

But I want to bring our time to a close this morning by pressing upon you the connection between your growth as a Christian and our health and strength as a church.

To do that I want to go back to our foundational passage for this entire series. Let me read to you quickly from 1 Peter 2:4-6:

“As you come to him, a living stone rejected by men but in the sight of God chosen and precious, ⁵ you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. ⁶ For it stands in Scripture: “Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone, a cornerstone chosen and precious, and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame.” (1 Peter 2:4–6 ESV)

Do you see the connection there?

This spiritual house is only as strong as each individual living stone.

There is no separation between the corporate reality and the individual reality. The house is only as strong as its stones.

The body is only as strong as its bones.

We are us. The church is you and me. Our health is her health. Your health is her health.

So we need to grow. We can't leave anyone behind. We need to STIR ONE ANOTHER UP. We need to teach, rebuke, encourage and correct – we need to BUILD UP THE BODY OF CHRIST – ONE BONE – ONE STONE – ONE MAN, ONE WOMAN, ONE CHILD, ONE PRECIOUS FAMILY at a time.

That is the process, brothers and sisters! That is how WE ARE BEING CHANGED, BY ONE DEGREE OF GLORY TO THE NEXT INTO THE SAME IMAGE AS JESUS CHRIST – this is the path – and this comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit. Thanks be to God, let's pray together.