

Keys to Spiritual Growth

Praising and Loving God

2 Peter 3:18

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Praising and Loving God¹

Scripture

Today we continue in my sermon series on “Keys to Spiritual Growth.” My foundational text for this series is 2 Peter 3:18:

¹⁸ But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be glory both now and forever! Amen. (2 Peter 3:18)

Introduction

Several years ago I received a newsletter from John MacArthur, pastor of Grace Community Church in Pasadena, California. This is part of what he wrote:

Several summers ago I took a three-month sabbatical from Grace Community Church. During that time I wondered if I should pastor another church because I kept asking myself, “How can I keep teaching the same things to the same people?”

As my family and I traveled across the country, people asked us Bible questions everywhere I went. I was amazed because they were all asking the same questions—they wanted to know basic spiritual truth.

At the same time I searched vigorously in my Bible for new sermon material. Yet everything I read sounded like the same simple truths only with different words. God used that to teach me something important: the Christian life is not merely a quest for something new, but also a matter of remembering the Lord’s established truths and remaining faithful to them.

John MacArthur continued by saying that the Lord impressed on him the need to periodically review and teach key biblical truths that should be vitally active in every Christian’s life.

¹ Much of the material for these sermons comes from Dr. John MacArthur.

This is consistent with Scripture. Speaking of essential biblical truths Peter said in 2 Peter 1:12-13: “So I will always remind you of these things, even though you know them and are firmly established in the truth you now have. I think it is right to refresh your memory as long as I live in the tent of this body.”

That is why I am taking you through this series of messages, which I am calling “The Keys to Spiritual Growth.” I want to remind you of specific biblical truths that will help you grow.

Lesson

Today, let’s look at two more keys that will help you grow spiritually. These keys are:

1. Praising God, and
2. Loving God.

I. Praising God

First, a key to spiritual growth is praising God.

I don’t believe a Christian can grow unless his or her life is characterized by praise.

In Psalm 50:23 God says, “Whoever offers praise glorifies me” (NKJV). If you want to glorify God, praise him. That is another simple key to growth.

Proud people don’t praise God—they’re too consumed with themselves. But humble people, people who are captured by the grace of God, are in awe of him, and praise pours from their hearts.

A. The Example of the Psalms

Let me draw your attention to the example of the Psalms.

Praise is so much a part of God’s pattern for his people that he gave us a hymnbook filled with it. The psalms are great hymns that were sung and spoken by the people of Israel. God wanted them to constantly offer him the praise of which he is so worthy.

Listen to what Psalm 86:9-10, 12 says: “All the nations you have made will come and worship before you, O Lord; they will bring glory to your name. For you are great and do marvelous deeds; you alone are God. . . . I will praise you, O Lord my God, with all my heart; I will glorify your name forever.”

Praising God is equated with giving him glory.

B. The Aspects of Praise

What exactly does it mean to praise God? Some think it is singing a song. Some think it is saying, “Praise the Lord! Hallelujah!” Some think it is waving your hands in the air. Some think it is silent prayer. What is the right answer? How do we praise the Lord? According to the Bible, true praise involves three aspects.

First, true praise involves reciting God’s attributes. Praise expresses the character of God.

Some people study the New Testament almost exclusively because it reveals many truths that were mysteries in the past. But one great reason to study the Old Testament is that it so powerfully reveals the character of God, enabling us to praise him better.

For example, Habakkuk praised God for his character—that he is a holy, almighty, eternal, covenant-keeping God (Habakkuk 1:12-13)—and that praise solved a great problem in his own heart. He didn’t understand why God was going to judge Israel by sending the evil Chaldeans to conquer them (Habakkuk 1:6-11). Habakkuk wanted God to revive and restore his people, but they had overstepped the limit of his patience.

In the middle of his confusion, Habakkuk remembered, “God is holy—he doesn’t make mistakes. God is a covenant-keeping God—he doesn’t break his promises. God is eternal—he is outside the flux of history.” Following his praise, Habakkuk was able to say, “The righteous will live by his faith” (Habakkuk 2:4). He felt better even though his circumstances had not changed. God did allow the Chaldeans to overrun Israel for a time, but Habakkuk knew his God was strong enough to handle any circumstance.

Instead of worrying about problems we cannot solve, we should say, “Lord, you are bigger than history. You own everything in the entire universe. You can do anything you want to do. You love us and promise we will never be without the things we need. You said you would take care of us as you take care of the grass of the field. You have promised that your character and power are at our disposal.”

That kind of praise glorifies God.

Second, true praise involves reciting God’s works. God’s attributes are displayed in his works.

After evaluating his problem, Habakkuk began to praise God for his works, trembling at the power displayed in them (Habakkuk 3:16). He said he would rejoice in the Lord even if everything crumbled around him (vv. 17-18). Why? Because God had proved himself in the past. That’s why the Old Testament contains such an extensive history of God’s works—so that we can know how he has proved faithful.

If you have a problem facing you that you don’t know how to solve, remember to praise God. Say to him, “Lord, you are the God who put the stars and planets into space. You are the God who formed the earth and separated the land from the sea. Then you made man and everything else that lives. Although man fell, you planned his redemption. You are the God who carved out a nation for yourself and preserved it through history. You are the God who performed wonder after wonder for that nation. You are the God who wrote the law on tablets of stone. You are the God who enabled your people to walk out of Egypt. You drowned Pharaoh’s army. You are the God who came into this world in human form, and then rose from the dead.”

When we praise God like that, our problems pale in comparison to all he has done. Remembering God’s past performance glorifies him and strengthens our faith.

And third, true praise involves giving thanks for God’s attributes and works. At the heart of praise is thanksgiving.

Luke 17 tells us that as Jesus “was going into a village, ten men who had leprosy met him. They stood at a distance and called out in a loud voice, ‘Jesus, Master, have pity on us!’ When he saw them, he said, ‘Go, show yourselves to the priests’” (vv. 12-14).

According to Mosaic Law, a leper could not return to society unless a priest verified that his disease was in remission.

Verse 14 continues, “And as they went, they were cleansed.” To be healed, they had to first take a step of faith based on what they had heard about Jesus.

“One of them, when he saw he was healed, came back, praising God in a loud voice. He threw himself at Jesus’ feet and thanked him—and he was a Samaritan” (vv. 15-16). One of the men, an outcast from Jewish society glorified God by thanking Jesus.

Then Jesus asked, “Were not all ten cleansed? Where are the other nine? Was no one found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?” Then he said to him, “Rise and go; your faith has made you well” (vv. 17-19).

Though all ten were physically healed, I believe that only the Samaritan was redeemed.

We so easily forget to thank God for his attributes and works. Thank God for his grace and mercy that he has extended toward you. Thank God for the way in which he is at work in your life.

In 1994 Mother Theresa spoke at the National Prayer Breakfast. She told the story about how she and some of her fellow nuns ministered to the sick and dying in the streets of Calcutta: “One evening we picked up four people from the street. One of them was in the most terrible condition. I told the others with me, ‘You take care of the other three; I will take care of the one who looks worst.’ I did all that my love could do. I put her in bed, and she had a beautiful smile on her face. She took hold of my hand as she said two words: ‘Thank you.’ Then she died.”

Mother Theresa then made the following comment: “I asked myself, what would I say if I were in her place? I would have tried to draw a little attention to myself. I would have said, ‘I am hun-

gry, I am dying, I am in pain.’ But she gave me much more; she gave me her grateful love. And she died with a smile on her face. Gratitude brings a smile and becomes a gift.”

God has ministered his grace and mercy to us. Instead of calling attention to ourselves, give thanks to God.

Praising God gives him glory. No matter what happens in our lives, we are to express our thanks to him for his attributes and gracious works. And doing this enables us to grow spiritually.

II. Loving God

A second key to spiritual growth is loving God.

Love for God is not merely a feeling; it is also an action. Jesus said, “If you love me, you will obey what I command” (John 14:15). So, loving God means obeying God. And if I could simplify the Christian life to one word, it would be *obedience*. I don’t just mean external obedience but a spirit of obedience.

It’s not like the little girl who defiantly continued to stand up after her father had told her many times to sit down. Finally her father said, “Sit down, or I’ll spank you.”

She sat down but looked up and said, “I’m sitting down on the outside, but I’m standing up on the inside.”

That’s obeying outwardly but disobeying in the heart. The Christian should have a willingness to obey from the heart.

A. *Christ’s Confrontation of Peter*

John 21 shows that we glorify God by loving him enough to obey him. Before he could affirm Peter’s call to the ministry, Jesus first confronted him about the issue of love.

John 21:15 says, “When they had finished eating, Jesus said to Simon Peter, ‘Simon son of John. . . .’” Jesus called Peter by his old name because he was acting like his old self. Instead of waiting for Jesus, Peter had returned to his first vocation of fishing (v. 3).

Then Jesus said, “Do you truly love me more than these?” Jesus used the strongest word for love in the Greek language—*agapao*.

He was saying, “Do you really love me, Peter? Do you love me supremely?”

“More than these” may have been a reference to the boats and nets or to the other disciples (cf. Matthew 26:33).

Peter replied, “Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.” Peter didn’t use *agapao*; he used the Greek word *phileo*, meaning, “I like you a lot.” Perhaps he didn’t want to say, “Lord, I super love you,” because Jesus might then have said, “Whoever has my commands and obeys them, he is the one who loves me” (John 14:21). Peter probably thought he couldn’t claim to have *agapao* love for Christ because he gave little evidence of it.

He would have been like the man who wrote to his sweetheart, “I would cross the burning sand or swim the English Channel to be near you, and if it doesn’t rain tonight, I’m coming over.”

Peter claimed a lesser love and hoped the Lord would accept it. Apparently Jesus did, for he then said to Peter, “Feed my lambs.” He wanted Peter to help build the kingdom by teaching God’s people.

In John 21:16-17 we read that again Jesus said, “Simon son of John, do you truly love me?”

He answered, “Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.” Jesus said, “Take care of my sheep.”

The third time he said to him, “Simon son of John, do you love me?” Peter was hurt because Jesus asked him the third time, “Do you love me?”

He said, “Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you.”

The reason Peter was grieved at the third question may have been that Christ used the word *phileo* rather than *agapao*. Jesus was questioning whether Peter even liked him.

Maybe our love isn't all that it could be; maybe it isn't *agapao*—supreme love. But if it is *phileo*, Christ will use us. He will take us where we are and build us up from there.

Like Peter, however, we do have to love him enough to obey him.

In John 21:18-19 Jesus said to Peter, “I tell you the truth, when you were younger you dressed yourself and went where you wanted; but when you are old you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go.” Jesus said this to indicate the kind of death by which Peter would glorify God.

Jesus was saying, “Peter, do you really love me? If you continue in my service and feed my people, it will cost you your life.”

Then Jesus said to Peter, “Follow me!” (v. 19).

He didn't say, “Follow me, and you will be successful. You will have health, wealth, and happiness.” That's what the cults and some of today's so-called Christianity promise.

Instead, Jesus told Peter, “Follow me, even though it will cost you your life.”

Peter then looked at the apostle John and said, “Lord, what about him?”

Jesus answered, “If I want him to remain alive until I return, what is that to you?” (vv. 21-22).

Jesus was saying, “If he lives until the second coming, that's none of your business.” (Because of that statement, a rumor started that John was going to live until the second coming. John had to write verse 23 to correct that rumor.)

Jesus then used an emphatic pronoun to repeat his command with more force, saying, “You must follow me” (v. 22).

B. Peter's Commitment to Christ

Peter did follow Christ. His life and ministry are recorded in the New Testament. And we see the life of a man who loved Jesus enough to obey him.

Keys to Spiritual Growth

In Acts 2:14-47 we see that Peter preached a tremendous sermon in Jerusalem, and three thousand people were saved.

In Acts 3:1-8 he healed a lame man who jumped up and danced around the Temple praising God.

In Acts 4:5-21 he confronted the Sanhedrin, saying, “Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved” (v. 12).

He and John courageously said, “Judge for yourselves whether it is right in God’s sight to obey you rather than God” (v. 19).

Peter was the shining light in the early days of the church following Pentecost.

Peter’s two letters express the tremendous joy he had from being called into Christ’s service.

In 2 Peter 1:14-15 he said, “Because I know that I will soon put it [i.e. my life] aside, as our Lord Jesus Christ has made clear to me. And I will make every effort to see that after my departure you will always be able to remember these things.” Peter wanted to serve Christ until he died.

One evidence of spiritual maturity is loving God enough to obey him, even when it is difficult. God is glorified when we willingly obey him no matter what the cost. Each time we obey God we grow spiritually, and each time we disobey our growth is retarded.

Conclusion

If you are a Christian, you want to grow. And if you are a Christian, you want to love God.

Brothers and sisters, you love God by obeying him. And when you obey him, you will love him and you will grow.

What are the areas in your life that need attention? What are the areas in your life in which you need to grow?

- You may need to read God’s Word more.
- You may need to be honest in your business dealings.

- You may need to stop watching pornographic material.
- You may need to confess a sin to someone.
- You may need to spend time in prayer.
- You may need to stop wasting time.

Years ago, a pastor of a small church in rural Pennsylvania decided to convert the two hours a night he spent watching TV into prayer time. As he began to labor in prayer, God gave him a vision to reach out to some New York City gang members who had been involved in a brutal, senseless murder. The pastor was David Wilkerson, who later became the pastor of Times Square Church in Manhattan, a vital assembly in the heart of Manhattan, NY.

God used David Wilkerson's simple obedience to bring some hardened gang members to himself, including Nicky Cruz, a notorious young hoodlum. David Wilkerson started a ministry, Teen Challenge, which eventually went nationwide; and he wrote about the story in his classic book *The Cross and the Switchblade*.

It's an incredible story, and it all began when he converted TV time into prayer time. Imagine what would happen if more and more Christians took that challenge seriously—the challenge to love God enough to obey him.

Don't wait to obey God in the big things. Obey God in the little things. Obey every command that you read in God's Word.

Now someone may say, "Where is the grace in this? You sound so legalistic."

Dr. Bryan Chapell, president of Covenant Theological Seminary, said in a class I attended, "In a grace-oriented church, it is important to remember that the rules don't change, but the reasons do." In other words, we obey the rules of God not in order to earn his favor but, rather, out of gratitude for his grace toward us.

I know you want to grow spiritually. Use these two keys I talked about today—praising God and loving him enough to obey him—and you will glorify God and grow spiritually. Amen.

Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ
and **membership** in his church family,
develop them to Christlike **maturity**,
equip them for their **ministry** in the church
and life **mission** in the world,
in order to **magnify** God's name.*

Sermons by Rev. Freddy Fritz

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Keys to Spiritual Growth

PRAYER:

O Lord our God, we thank you for what we are learning in the keys to spiritual growth.

O Father, you alone are worthy of all of our praise and worship. Help us to worship you in every area of our lives.

And Father, you have also called us to love you with all of our heart, mind, soul, and strength. Help us to show our love for you in our obedience to you.

All of this we pray in Jesus' name, to whom be glory both now and forever! Amen.

CHARGE:

May God help each one of us to grow spiritually. And as you do, may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all, now and always. Amen.