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# Spiritual Growth without Self-Righteousness

*All Biblical quotes are from the NKJV unless otherwise indicated*

## Cornerstone Doctrinal Distinctives

- We believe that devotional practices are vital to a believer's communication with God. However, a believer's life is changed by obedience to God and His Word acted out in the real world (*I Samuel 15:22 / (Matthew 5:23, 24)*). Praise without obedience is merely flattery.
- We believe that developing a self-righteous attitude (*typified by the Pharisees in the New Testament*) is a constant danger to every Christian. This toxic religiosity must be continuously guarded against by all believers by means of prayerful self examination (*Isaiah 65:2 / Mark 12:38-40*).

In this lesson we will consider the following topics

1. **Our Need For Spiritual Growth**
2. **Choosing To Develop Spiritual Habits**
3. **Patience Is Required In Order To Experience Spiritual Growth**
4. **Unreliable Indicators Of Inner Spiritual Growth**
5. **Evidence Of Self-Righteousness**
6. **Evidence Of True Spiritual Growth**

<h2>1. <i>Our Need For Spiritual Growth</i></h2>
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God's wants for us the same thing any good parent wants for their children. A good parent wants their child to grow up wise, healthy and happy.

**Ephesians 4:11** He is the one who gave these gifts to the church: the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, and the pastors and teachers. <sup>12</sup> Their responsibility is to equip God's people to do his work and build up the church, the body of

Christ, <sup>13</sup>until we come to such unity in our faith and knowledge of God's Son **that we will be mature and full grown in the Lord**, measuring up to the full stature of Christ. <sup>14</sup>Then we will no longer be like children, forever changing our minds about what we believe because someone has told us something different or because someone has cleverly lied to us and made the lie sound like the truth. <sup>15</sup>Instead, we will hold to the truth in love, **becoming more and more in every way like Christ**, who is the head of his body, the church. (NLT)

**1 Peter 2:1** Therefore, laying aside all malice, all deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and all evil speaking, <sup>2</sup>as newborn babes, **desire the pure milk of the word, that you may grow thereby,**

**2 Peter 3:18** but grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To Him *be* the glory both now and forever. Amen.

**Galatians 4:19** But oh, my dear children! I feel as if I am going through labor pains for you again, and they will continue **until Christ is fully developed in your lives**. (NLT)

We must simply be as a little child to enter the kingdom. A child with good parents depends on and trusts the parents. The child is unaware of the fact that expecting the parents to care, protect and provide for them is their right by birth; it is simply taken for granted. It would not occur to the child that it must earn the parents loving attention. The child cries out and the parent is there to provide what is needed.

This childlike attitude is the key to a growing awareness of God's constant presence in the life of every Christian. Our relationship with our Heavenly Father is solely based on our second birth through faith in Jesus Christ. God can give us faith, knowledge, increased strength and will power. We are responsible for maintaining a childlike attitude. A child is eager to learn but humble enough to trust the parent to teach them at a child's level.

### **Your Heart, Not Your Mind, Unlocks the Door of Spiritual Growth**

Spiritual growth is a 'level playing field'. It doesn't matter if those around us consider us intelligent and literate. Neither those with outgoing personalities nor those who are introverts have an advantage. This is true because the heart

attitude is the determining factor in our spiritual growth. Jesus promised that anyone who asks would receive.

**Matthew 7:7** (*Jesus speaking*) “Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you.

Notice the verbs in the passage above. Spiritual growth is not passive but is active.

However, the book of Proverbs completes that thought with the revelation that seeking wisdom with a bad attitude “short circuits’ the process. That makes a level playing field based on the heart not the mind.

**Proverbs 14:6** **A scoffer seeks wisdom and finds none**, But knowledge is easy to one who has understanding.

## *2. Choosing To Develop Spiritual Habits*

### **De-Mystifying The Spiritual Life**

When we talk about ‘fellowshipping’ with God we simply mean sharing our life with Him. Not in some fragmented and intermittent ‘religious’ way, but in our everyday life. I am not talking about the terrible bondage of desperately trying to consciously think about God constantly through sheer will power. That would be a life of crippling obsession, not a life of Grace.

How, then, do we develop a life of enjoying our relationship with Him by Grace? By understanding we are creatures of habit. Habits are inevitable. We awake and prepare our selves to leave our houses with pretty much the same sequence each day. We usually shop at the same grocery store, buy roughly the same staple items; watch our same favorite TV shows, etc. In one sense the only real choices we have are the choice of habits we choose to cultivate.

### **A Spiritual Lifestyle Is Produced By Patiently Weaving Spiritual Habits Into Our Current Lifestyle**

So we work our needed spiritual maintenance into our everyday lives in a rational and sustainable way. Even Jesus Christ had ‘habits’ or patterns of behavior.

**Luke 4:16** And He [Jesus] came to Nazareth, where He had been brought up; and **as was His custom**, He entered the synagogue on the Sabbath, and stood up to read.

An animals 'habitat' is that area it 'inhabits'. You and I 'live' (*spiritually speaking*) where our habits place us. When we change our habits we change our habitat, we begin to 'live' in a different place.

Notice in the next passage that unrighteousness is described as a process. The passage also speaks of unrighteousness in terms of conception, birth, and growth.

**James 1:13** When tempted, no one should say, "God is tempting me." For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone; 14 but each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed. 15 Then, after desire has **conceived**, it gives **birth** to sin; and sin, when it is **full-grown**, gives **birth** to death.

Conversely righteousness is also a process that involves planting a seed that 'gives birth' and grows. Unrighteousness finally gives birth to death. Righteousness inevitably gives birth to life eternal.

- Plant a thought and reap an action
- Plant an action and reap a habit
- Plant a habit and reap a lifestyle

### **Tending The Garden Of Our Lives.**

Each act we perform and each thought we dwell on will be harvested in our own future whether we want that harvest to occur or not.

**Galatians 6:7** Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, that he will also reap.

We can affect that future harvest by choosing carefully what we are planting in the garden of our life today.

**Galatians 6:8** For the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life.

There is both a promise and a warning in these verses. This passage is translated in a simpler form in the New Living Translation.

**Galatians 6:7** Don't be misled. Remember that you can't ignore God and get away with it. You will always reap what you sow! <sup>8</sup>Those who live only to satisfy their own sinful desires will harvest the consequences of decay and death. But those who live to please the Spirit will harvest everlasting life from the Spirit. <sup>9</sup>So don't get tired of doing what is good. Don't get discouraged and give up, for we will reap a harvest of blessing at the appropriate time. NLT

Planting and reaping a spiritual harvest is an important concept throughout the scriptures from Genesis to Revelation. The concept also brings out the contrasts and comparisons between the first Adam and the Last Adam Jesus Christ.

**1 Corinthians 15:22** For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ all shall be made alive...<sup>45</sup> And so it is written, "The **first man Adam** became a living being." **The last Adam** *became* a life-giving spirit.

The first Adam was made to be a gardener by God

**Genesis 2:8** Then the LORD God planted a **garden** in Eden, in the east, and there he placed the man he had created...<sup>15</sup> The LORD God placed the man in the Garden of Eden to tend and care for it.

The last Adam prayed in and was arrested in the garden of Gethsemane.

**John 18:1** When Jesus had spoken these words, He went forth with His disciples over the ravine of the Kidron, where there was a garden, in which He entered with His disciples.

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The last Adam, while enduring crucifixion, promised the thief being crucified beside Him that he would join Him in paradise the same day. The literal meaning of the word 'paradise' means a walled garden.

**Luke 23:42** And he was saying, "Jesus, remember me when You come in Your kingdom!"

43 And He said to him, "Truly I say to you, **today you shall be with Me in Paradise.**"

The last Adam was buried in a garden.

**John 19:41** Now in the place where He was crucified **there was a garden**, and in the garden a new tomb in which no one had yet been laid.

The last Adam was resurrected in a garden and was mistaken for the gardener.

**John 20:11** But Mary was standing outside the tomb weeping; and so, as she wept, she stooped and looked into the tomb;... she turned around and \*saw Jesus standing there, and did not know that it was Jesus.

15 Jesus \*said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you seeking?"

**Supposing Him to be the gardener**, she \*said to Him, "Sir, if you have carried Him away, tell me where you have laid Him, and I will take Him away."

16 Jesus \*said to her, "Mary!" She turned and \*said to Him in Hebrew, "Rabboni!" (which means, Teacher).

Jesus spoke of our spiritual growth in terms of a vineyard.

**John 15:1** (*Jesus speaking*) "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, that it may bear more fruit.** ... <sup>5</sup> "I am the vine, you *are* the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing.

The act of pruning places the priority on fruit not on growth alone. In fact the act of pruning sacrifices excessive growth in order to maximize the goal of bearing fruit. We desire spiritual growth. God desires spiritual fruit from us. This principle should be remembered when we experience plateaus and setbacks in our spiritual growth.

Clearing a patch of land and preparing the soil does not make that plot of land a garden. It only becomes a garden when we plant something in it. Additionally we must water, fertilize and protect the new growth. In like manner attempting to remove all the spiritual weeds (*sins*) in our life is not enough. We must plant and nurture spiritual seed in our life or there will be no spiritual fruit.

**Galatians 5:22** But **the fruit (result) of the Spirit is:** love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, <sup>23</sup> gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law.

**Proverbs 12:3** A man is not established by wickedness, But **the root of the righteous cannot be moved.** ...<sup>12</sup> The wicked covet the catch of evil *men*, But **the root of the righteous yields fruit.**

Jesus also spoke of an enemy sowing tares (*weeds that look like wheat*) in a good mans planting of wheat.

**Matthew 13:24** Another parable He put forth to them, saying: "The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field; <sup>25</sup>but while men slept, his enemy came and sowed tares among the wheat and went his way.

I believe this passage tells us we must be watchful of what others may plant into our lives.

**Hebrews 12:14** Pursue peace with all *people*, and holiness, without which no one will see the Lord: <sup>15</sup>looking carefully lest anyone fall short of the grace of God; **lest any root of bitterness springing up cause trouble, and by this many become defiled;**

Planting and harvesting require a long term view rather than looking for instantaneous results. At any one time in our lives there are various crops coming to fruition on a schedule that differs one from another. Pumpkins mature faster than fruit trees. Trees planted for use as lumber may span more than a human lifetime to be ready for harvest. All these crops can grow at the same time, on the same acreage. Many different things are both growing and maturing at different times in your spiritual life.

Our families are also a garden. In the King James Bible the word 'husbandman' is used to identify a vinedresser, farmer or gardener. It is from this concept that we have derived the word 'husband' when referring to the male partner in a marriage. The husband is to see his role in a marriage and family as cultivating and nurturing an atmosphere that leads to spiritual growth for all the family.

**Psalm 128:3** Your wife *shall be* like a fruitful vine In the very heart of your house, Your children like olive plants All around your table. <sup>4</sup>Behold, thus shall the man be blessed Who fears the LORD.

How may we cultivate the soil of our lives and nurture spiritual growth?

**Philippians 4:8** Finally, brethren, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, if there is any excellence and if anything worthy of praise,  **dwell (*think KJV*)** on these things.

God, Himself is a gardener and we are His field.

**1 Corinthians 3:7** So then **neither he who plants is anything, nor he who waters, but God who gives the increase.** <sup>8</sup>Now he who plants and he who waters are one, and each one will receive his own reward according to his own labor. <sup>9</sup>For we are God's fellow workers; **you are God's field, *you are*** God's building.

Planet Earth is God's spiritual garden and humankind is His crop.

**Revelation 14:14** Then I saw the Son of Man sitting on a white cloud. He had a gold crown on his head and a sharp sickle in his hand. <sup>15</sup>Then an angel came from the Temple and called out in a loud voice to the one sitting on the cloud, "Use the sickle, for the time has come for you to harvest; **the crop is ripe on the earth.**" <sup>16</sup>So the one sitting on the cloud swung his sickle over the earth, **and the whole earth was harvested.**

This counsel may not seem religious enough for some. Surely we must make some immediate and earthshaking sacrifice to grow in God? No, we must

slowly and methodically weave our spiritual life into our everyday lifestyle until one day there is no difference between the two.

I am not talking about suddenly 'becoming so heavenly minded you are no earthly good'. I am not talking about sudden mood swings full of giddiness or of suddenly becoming insufferably somber and painfully religious.

I am talking about using the common sense that God gave us and about realizing that the spiritual person we intend to become will require a commitment to the long haul and a commitment to patient faith.

God is a good Father and will give us what we need. But we must ask. However, I believe most Christians think that all the other Christians know some secret that they don't know. They believe that other Christians are closer to God than they are and feel that they must have an inferior understanding of how to pray. Let me tell you a well-kept secret about prayer.

**Romans 8:26** In the same way the Spirit also helps our weakness; for **we do not know how to pray as we should**, but the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words;

The Apostle Paul wrote that wonderful admission of imperfection. It could also be said we don't know how to fast, praise, etc as we should. That realization should be liberating. Successfully connecting with God cannot depend on our understanding, faith, or motivation being perfect. If it did no one would get through to God but Jesus Christ alone.

We will learn about the endless ways of enjoying God's presence forever. But it is our relation with God that results in this continuous unfolding of our spiritual experience not the reverse. Relationship with God is based in making Jesus Christ our Savior. Spiritual growth derives from the cultivating that relationship

### **Prayer Is Talking With God**

You buy a book on prayer and before your halfway through you are lost in lists and sub lists of types of prayer;

- petition,
- travailing prayer,
- prayer in the spirit,
- praying with the understanding,

- praying without wavering,
- prays of intercession,
- prayers of repentance,
- prayers of spiritual warfare,
- praying according to the will of God, etc.

Yes it is true that there are many types of prayer just as there are many types of conversation. You can make small talk, joke, question, shout for joy, whisper 'sweet nothings', have serious confrontations, confess, inform, teach, sing, etc. You learn these things through communicating with others throughout your life. They can't be taught, all at once, in kindergarten. So it is with prayer.

Relax. Just start talking to God. If you don't know how start by telling Him that you don't know how to start. We can't impress God with religious language so learn to talk to Him about what is happening in your life. If it's important to you, it's important to God. When your child or grandchild tells you about their doll or toy soldier, you enjoy it because it's important to them and they are sharing that with you. So it is with our Heavenly Father. Thank Him when you are enjoying a ball game or a book or a movie. When something tastes good or the sunset is special.

Ask Him questions. Just don't always expect an immediate answer. Prayer is a lifelong conversation with God and He never seems to hurry.

We often make the Devotional Life much more complicated than it is meant to be. Christianity is like marriage in a sense. Husbands and wives know that a good marriage requires love, forgiveness and humility. Marriage is not mysterious. It's just hard to do what we know we should do. Christian spiritual growth is not mysterious. It's just hard to do what we know we should do.

More important than all the religious techniques we think we must learn before we can really connect with God is the underlying truth that God wants to 'walk' with us. Our Devotional Life must not be based on the faulty concept that we must woo a reluctant God to pay attention to us.

God created the first man, Adam, as a 'son' (*Luke 3:38*) and enjoyed being with him in the Garden of Eden. It was man that turned from God, not God who turned away from man.

When discussing the Devotional Life we Christians usually focus on the many varieties of prayer, praise, meditation, Bible reading and fasting. While this can be useful it can also tend to discourage the hearer and give the impression that fellowshiping with God is based on our knowledge or on our human will power and discipline.

The truth is that God wants to fellowship with us now, flawed though we may be, and we don't have wait until we 'qualify' to do so. There is only one reason we can now enter the holiest place to fellowship with our Heavenly Father and that reason has nothing to do with anything we have done or have yet to do.

The sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross of Calvary is the sole basis by which any of us can approach a perfect God.

**Hebrews 4:14** Seeing then that we have a great High Priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast *our* confession. <sup>15</sup> For we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all *points* tempted as *we are*, yet without sin. <sup>16</sup> **Let us therefore come boldly** to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

If we begin to think that our knowledge of the scriptures or anything we can do in our devotional life can obligate God to give us greater access to His presence we will have missed the single most vital truth of Christ's gospel.

**Hebrews 10:19** Therefore, brethren, having **boldness to enter the Holiest by the blood of Jesus**, <sup>20</sup> by a new and living way which He consecrated for us, through the veil, that is, His flesh, <sup>21</sup> and *having* a High Priest over the house of God, <sup>22</sup> **let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith**, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. <sup>23</sup> Let us hold fast the confession of *our* hope without wavering, for He who promised *is* faithful.

### Praising Our Creator

Another vital type of communication with our Creator is expressing thanks and praise to Him. We praise Him for who He is, what He has done and what He has promised to do.

It would be a mistake to think that God needs to hear flattery from us. We should remember from chapter three that God is complete and has no needs.

**Acts 17:24** “The God who made the world and all things in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands;  
25 **nor is He served by human hands, as though He needed anything**, since He Himself gives to all people life and breath and all things; NKJV

**Acts 17:24** “He is the God who made the world and everything in it. Since he is Lord of heaven and earth, he doesn’t live in man-made temples,  
25 **and human hands can’t serve his needs—for he has no needs**. He himself gives life and breath to everything, and he satisfies every need there is. NLT

Why then should we praise and thank Him? It might be helpful to think in terms of the love of a human parent for an adopted child who has a history of being abused.

The loving parent longs for the day when their new child begins to express love for them. They look forward to that day, not because they are insecure and need to hear flattery from that child, but because expressing love is something that a whole and healthy person should find easy and natural to do.

The parent knows that when their adopted child begins to express love and appreciation to them that act will be the indicator that the child is finally becoming a whole and complete individual.

So it is with our Heavenly Father. He has rescued us from a sinful world that has ravaged and injured us. When we begin to express our love for Him He rejoices for our sake not because it adds anything to Him. At that point we are becoming more like the kind of person who will feel at home in heaven where love and appreciation are expressed unselfconsciously and freely.

In fact when we are singing to Him and about Him He is joining in a kind of duet, unheard by us, that expresses His love for us as well.

**Zephaniah 3:17** The LORD your God in your midst, The Mighty One, will save; He will rejoice over you with gladness, He will quiet *you* with His love, He will rejoice over you with singing.” (NKJV)

In a similar way our obedience to our Heavenly Father’s guidelines for our lives is also a way that we can bless Him. Our obedience to Him makes our lives better and minimizes our struggles and sorrows, not His. He does not need our assistance in order to achieve His goals.

Imagine a loving father who is enjoying building a doghouse with his young son. The father could have built the doghouse much more quickly and could

have produced a doghouse vastly superior to the one he and his son are building.

However, the goal the father has in mind is not a better-quality doghouse. The father's goal is enjoyment of his relationship with his son and the impartation of important lessons to his son such as diligence and the joy of creating something with his own hands. That finished doghouse, with all its imperfections, will stand as a monument to the relationship between father and son not as an example of flawless canine architecture.

### **Do Devotional Exercises Have Power Within Themselves To Change Us?**

The effects of physical exercise can often be quantified as *X* amount of time exercising equals *X* amount of calories burned. It is a mistake to think of devotional exercises in this way. *X* amount of time spent in prayer does not necessarily equal *X* amount of spiritual improvement. The Bible makes it clear that our devotional exercises make us aware of God's presence by which we can become aware of areas of our life in which must become more obedient. It is the obedience in our everyday life that causes our spiritual growth.

**Matthew 5:23** (*Jesus speaking*) "Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, 24 **leave** your gift there in front of the altar.

**First** go and be reconciled to your brother;  
**then** come and offer your gift.

We must not mistake experiencing religious emotions or the quality & quantity of nurtured religious habits as being evidence of real spiritual growth. Only love (*not 'feeling' loving*) is evidence of spiritual growth. Real spiritual progress can be evaluated only in reference to seeing and treating others as God would in an environment we can not control.

**Isaiah 58:2** ... **they seek Me daily, And delight to know My ways,** As a nation that did righteousness, And did not forsake the ordinance of their God. They ask of Me the ordinances of justice; They take delight in approaching God.

3 **'Why have we fasted,' they say, 'and You have not seen? Why** have we afflicted our souls, and You take no notice?" "In fact, in the day of your fast you find pleasure, And exploit all your laborers. 4 Indeed you fast for strife and

debate, And to strike with the fist of wickedness. You will not fast as *you do* this day, To make your voice heard on high. <sup>5</sup> Is it a fast that I have chosen, A day for a man to afflict his soul? *Is it* to bow down his head like a bulrush, And to spread out sackcloth and ashes? Would you call this a fast, And an acceptable day to the LORD?

6 **“Is this not the fast that I have chosen:** To loose the bonds of wickedness, To undo the heavy burdens, To let the oppressed go free, And that you break every yoke? <sup>7</sup> *Is it* not to share your bread with the hungry, And that you bring to your house the poor who are cast out; When you see the naked, that you cover him, And not hide yourself from your own flesh?

8 Then your light shall break forth like the morning, Your healing shall spring forth speedily, And your righteousness shall go before you; The glory of the LORD shall be your rear guard. <sup>9</sup> Then you shall call, and the LORD will answer; You shall cry, and He will say, ‘Here I *am*.’ “If you take away the yoke from your midst, The pointing of the finger, and speaking wickedness, <sup>10</sup> *If* you extend your soul to the hungry And satisfy the afflicted soul, **Then your light shall dawn in the darkness, And your darkness shall be as the noonday.** <sup>11</sup> The LORD will guide you continually, And satisfy your soul in drought, And strengthen your bones; You shall be like a watered garden, And like a spring of water, whose waters do not fail.

Accomplishing spiritual acts that seem to be impressive can sometimes be done with out being motivated by love. In that case they accomplish nothing in spiritual terms.

**1 Corinthians 13:1** Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I have become sounding brass or a clanging cymbal. <sup>2</sup> And though I have *the gift of* prophecy, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, but have not love, I am **nothing**. <sup>3</sup> And though I bestow all my goods to feed *the poor*, and though I give my body to be burned, but have not love, **it profits me nothing**.

Some Spiritual Growth Doesn't Come Through Individual Devotions But By Serving God With Other Christians

**Psalm 73:2** But as for me, my feet came close to stumbling, My steps had almost slipped. <sup>3</sup> For I was envious of the arrogant As I saw the prosperity of the wicked. ...**13** Surely in vain I have kept my heart pure And washed my hands in

innocence; 14 For I have been stricken all day long And chastened every morning.

15 If I had said, *"I will speak thus,"* Behold, I would have betrayed the generation of Your children.

16 When I pondered to understand this, It was troublesome in my sight **17 Until I came into the sanctuary of God; Then I perceived their end.**

When we are humble enough to admit our need of other believers God is able to use us to encourage and bless one another in our spiritual growth.

**"Spiritual transformation is not a matter of trying harder but of training wisely.** This what the Apostle means when he encourages his young protégé Timothy to 'Train yourself in Godliness.'" This thought also lies behind his advice to the church at Corinth: "Everyone who competes in the games goes into *strict training*. They do it to get a crown that will not last; but we do it to get a crown that will last forever."

*The Life You've Always Wanted", John Ortberg. Page 43*

**1 Timothy 4:7** Do not waste time arguing over godless ideas and old wives' tales. Spend your time and energy in **training** yourself for spiritual fitness.

8 Physical exercise has some value, but spiritual exercise is much more important, for it promises a reward in both this life and the next. (NLT)

"Someone who is not a good tennis player may now and then make a good shot. What you mean by a good player is the man whose eye and muscles and nerves have been so trained by making innumerable good shots that he can now be relied on. They have a certain quality which is there even when he is not playing, just as the mathematician's mind has a certain habit and outlook which is there even when he is not doing mathematics. In the same way a man who perseveres in doing just actions gets in the end a certain quality of character. **Now it is that quality rather than the particular actions which we mean when we talk of virtue.**

...We might think that God wanted simple obedience to a set of rules: whereas He really wants people of a particular sort.

*Mere Christianity page 77*

### The Dangers of the Spiritual Journey

Some people think that abusing their physical body is a means of obtaining spiritual progress. Those people are very wrong.

**Colossians 2:18** Don't let anyone condemn you by insisting on self-denial.

...These people claim to be so humble, but their sinful minds have made them proud.

...**22** Such rules are mere human teaching about things that are gone as soon as we use them. **23** These rules may seem wise because they require strong devotion, humility, and severe bodily discipline. But they have no effect when it comes to conquering a person's evil thoughts and desires. *NLT*

Abuse of one's own body in order to achieve a spiritual result has more in common with the priests of the pagan god Baal than it does with either Judaism or Biblical Christianity.

**1 Kings 18:26** So they took the bull which was given them, and they prepared *it*, and called on the name of Baal from morning even till noon, saying, "O Baal, hear us!" But *there was* no voice; no one answered. Then they leaped about the altar which they had made. <sup>27</sup> And so it was, at noon, that Elijah mocked them and said, "Cry aloud, for he *is* a god; either he is meditating, or he is busy, or he is on a journey, *or* perhaps he is sleeping and must be awakened." <sup>28</sup> So they cried aloud, **and cut themselves, as was their custom, with knives and lances, until the blood gushed out on them.**

### ***3. Patience Is Required In Order To Experience Spiritual Growth***

**Luke 21:19** (*Jesus speaking*) By your patience possess your souls.

After spending millions of years with God in Heaven try to imagine Him gathering all of His saints together and announcing "Well, that's about it. I have nothing new left to show or teach you. What do you want to do now?"

Of course that can never happen. Our spiritual growth will literally continue forever because God is infinite and we can never reach the limits of His self disclosure. After spending a billion years with Him in eternity we will have come to know Him to a depth and specificity that will make our present

knowledge of Him seem like abysmal ignorance. Even then we will be like little children splashing in the surf at the beach who imagine they have plumbed the depths and span of the ocean.

That leaves us with a choice to make concerning the progress of our soul. Will we allow our desire to know Him more deeply result in a life of constant frustration and bitter discontent? Or will we choose to delight in this game of discovery and enjoy this eternal walk with our Heavenly Father, He is more concerned with the health and development of our soul than He is with merely satisfying our idle curiosity.

Much like a loving parent who hides Easter eggs so that their children may delight in discovering them, our Heavenly Father hides spiritual treasures for us, not from us.

### **When Jesus Was On Earth, Even He Had To Grow Step By Step, Day By Day**

**Luke 2:52** And Jesus kept increasing in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men.

So we make our Bible reading, prayer time, etc, part of our daily schedule starting with steps small enough so that we do not lose our balance. Like physical exercise, a little bit done daily is better than a lot done monthly.

### **We Must Be Patient Because We Can Only Grow Spiritually Step By Step, Day By Day**

**Isaiah 28:9** "To whom would He [God] teach knowledge, And to whom would He interpret the message? Those just weaned from milk? Those just taken from the breast?

10 "For He [God] says,

'Order on order, order on order,  
Line on line, line on line,  
A little here, a little there.' "

Step by step, line on line as you would build a rock wall. Consuming our spiritual nutrition in daily doses (*Christ said to pray for our **daily** bread*) not in

religious 'binging'. The spiritual learning process is cumulative. God teaches us in our everyday life, not only in the areas we think of as being religious.

**Matthew 6:11** Give us this day our daily bread.

God's miraculous provision of manna to the Israelites who were wandering in the desert required them to gather their own manna and to do so daily (*with the exception of the weekly Sabbath day*). See Exodus chapter 16.

In the same way our spiritual nutrition through prayer, praise and Bible study is something we must do for ourselves and should do so daily.

#### ***4. Unreliable Indicators Of Inner Spiritual Growth***

##### **Spiritual (Religious) Knowledge**

**1 Corinthians 8:1** ...While **knowledge may make us feel important**, it is love that really builds up the church. (NLT)

**1 Corinthians 8:1** ... we know that we all have knowledge. **Knowledge makes arrogant**, but love edifies. (NASB95)

##### **Comparison to others (Competition)**

**2 Corinthians 10:12** For we dare not class ourselves or compare ourselves with those who commend themselves. But they, measuring themselves by themselves, and **comparing themselves among themselves, are not wise.**

##### **The Opinion of Others**

**1 Corinthians 4:3** What about me? Have I been faithful? **Well, it matters very little what you or anyone else thinks. I don't even trust my own judgment on this point.** <sup>4</sup>My conscience is clear, but that isn't what matters. It is the Lord himself who will examine me and decide. <sup>5</sup>So be careful not to jump to conclusions before the Lord returns as to whether or not someone is faithful. When the Lord comes, he will bring our deepest secrets to light and will reveal our private motives. And then God will give to everyone whatever praise is due. (NLT)

### Feelings

Consider how the psalmist in the following passages admits his despondent emotions but refuses to let those emotions define him. Instead he wills himself to remember God's past blessings and thereby be encouraged. He takes dominion over his feelings.

**Psalm 42:4** When I remember these *things*, I pour out my soul within me. For I used to go with the multitude; I went with them to the house of God, With the voice of joy and praise, With a multitude that kept a pilgrim feast. <sup>5</sup> **Why are you cast down, O my soul? And why are you disquieted within me?** Hope in God, for I shall yet praise Him *For* the help of His countenance.

<sup>6</sup> O my God, my soul is cast down within me; **Therefore** I will remember You from the land of the Jordan, And from the heights of Hermon, From the Hill Mizar...<sup>11</sup> Why are you cast down, O my soul? And why are you disquieted within me? Hope in God; For I shall yet praise Him, The help of my countenance and my God.

The psalmist also employs his memory to control his emotions in the following passage.

**Psalm 103:1** Bless the LORD, O my soul; And all that is within me, *ble*ss His holy name! <sup>2</sup> Bless the LORD, O my soul, And **forget not all His benefits**: <sup>3</sup> Who forgives all your iniquities, Who heals all your diseases, <sup>4</sup> Who redeems your life from destruction, Who crowns you with lovingkindness and tender mercies, <sup>5</sup> Who satisfies your mouth with good *things*, *So that* your youth is renewed like the eagle's.

The joy of the Lord is our strength. But when the present holds no joy for us because of life's challenges we must utilize our memory to remember past blessings. When Christ was suffering on the cross for our sins He looked to the future joy that His present sufferings would bring.

**Hebrews 12:1** Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares *us*, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, <sup>2</sup> looking unto Jesus,

the author and finisher of *our* faith, who **for the joy that was set before Him** endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

Christian writer CS Lewis said this about Christians and their feelings.

Nobody can always have devout feelings: And even if we could feelings are not what God principally cares about. Christian love, either towards God or towards man, is an affair of the will. ...He will give us feelings of love if He pleases. We cannot create them for ourselves and we must not demand them as a right.

*Mere Christianity* page 117, 118

## *5. Evidence Of Self-Righteousness*

The ways of experiencing God in our lives bring an accompanying spiritual danger. The frequent human response to the privilege of knowing God through the Devotional life is to turn spiritual matters into a competitive sport. Pharisaism is the name given this religious rivalry.<sup>1</sup> Pharisaism is compared by Christ to yeast in dough (*Matthew 16:6*). Even a little bit changes whatever is around it. Pharisaism is contagious. In fact it is endemic.

This religious snobbery seems to annoy God. In fact it was God, Himself, who first used the term 'holier than thou' to describe such distasteful religious attitudes.

**Isaiah 65:2** (*God speaking*) I have spread out my hands all the day unto a rebellious people, which walketh in a way that was not good, after their own thoughts; **3 A people that provoketh me to anger continually to my face; ...5 Which say, 'Stand by thyself, come not near to me; for I am holier than thou'.** These are a smoke in my nose, a fire that burneth all the day.

The New Testament sect of the Pharisees typified such religious pride.

### THE 3 DISTINGUISHING CHARACTERISTICS OF THE PHARISEE

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<sup>1</sup> The Pharisees in the New Testament were defined by their zeal to display that they were holier, more 'on fire for God', than those around them. Being judgmental was simply the outcome of their 'Pharisaism'. So it continues today in Christ's Church.

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### 1. Pharisaism cannot resist the temptation to judge others spiritual 'temperature'.

Pharisaism's most distinguishing characteristic is that of judging other people's spiritual depth and fervor in relationship to the Pharisee's own inner state. The Pharisee always considers his own spiritual condition to be superior to others.

**Luke 18:9** And He [Jesus] also told this parable to some people who trusted in themselves **that they were righteous, and viewed others with contempt:**  
10 "Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. 11 The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself: 'God, I thank you that **I am not like other men**—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. 12 I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.'

### 2. The Pharisee must make sure that his 'superior' spiritual condition is apparent to all those around himself.

**John 12:42** Nevertheless many even of the rulers believed in Him, but because of the Pharisees they were not confessing Him, for fear that they would be put out of the synagogue; 43 **for they loved the approval of men rather than the approval of God.**

**Mark 12:38** In His teaching He [Jesus] was saying: "Beware of the scribes who like to walk around in long robes, and like respectful greetings in the market places,  
39 and chief seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets,  
40 who devour widows' houses, and **for appearance's sake offer long prayers;** these will receive greater condemnation."

**Matthew 23:1** Then Jesus spoke to the crowds and to His disciples, 2 saying: "The scribes and the Pharisees have seated themselves in the chair of Moses; ...5 **But they do all their deeds to be noticed by men;** for they broaden their phylacteries and lengthen the tassels of their garments.

### 3. Pharisees view spiritual growth as a competition with others.

**Mark 2:18** John's disciples and the Pharisees were fasting; and they came and said to Him [Jesus], "Why do John's disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees fast, but Your disciples do not fast?"

Consider these excerpts on 'Pride' from C.S. Lewis' 'Mere Christianity

All the worst pleasures are purely spiritual: The pleasure of putting other people in the wrong, of bossing and patronizing and spoiling sport, and backbiting; the pleasures of power, of hatred. ...That is why a cold, self-righteous prig who goes regularly to church may be far nearer to hell than a prostitute. But, of course, it is better to be neither.

*Mere Christianity page 94, 95*

The Christians are right: It is pride that has been the chief cause of misery in every nation and every family since the world began. Other vices may sometimes bring people together: You may find good fellowship and jokes and friendliness among drunken people or unchaste people. But Pride always means enmity ---it is enmity. And not only enmity between man and man, but enmity to God.

*Mere Christianity page 111*

**The following passages may reveal the antidote to religiosity.**

Our Lord Jesus clearly commanded that we should not keep His gospel to ourselves but rather we should proclaim it to the entire world.

**Matthew 10:27** (*Jesus speaking*) "Whatever I tell you in the dark, speak in the light; and what you hear in the ear, preach on the housetops.

There is no secret doctrine reserved only for the initiated in Christianity. How then should we understand His words in the two passages below?

**Matthew 6:2** Therefore, when you do a charitable deed, do not sound a trumpet before you as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may have glory from men. Assuredly, I say to you, they have their reward. <sup>3</sup>But when you do a charitable deed, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, <sup>4</sup>that your charitable deed may be **in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will Himself reward you openly.**

**Matthew 6:16** moreover, when you fast, do not be like the hypocrites, with a sad countenance. For they disfigure their faces that they may appear to men to be fasting. Assuredly, I say to you, they have their reward. <sup>17</sup> But you, when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, <sup>18</sup> so that you do not appear to men to be fasting, but **to your Father who is in the secret place; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly.**

**Matthew 6:5** "And when you pray, you shall not be like the hypocrites. For they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the corners of the streets, that they may be seen by men. Assuredly, I say to you, they have their reward. <sup>6</sup> But you, when you pray, go into your room, and when you have shut your door, **pray to your Father who is in the secret place; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly.**

Of course public prayer and praise is important and must not be abandoned. Christ prayed in public for the sake of those who would overhear but His motive was not pharisaical in nature.

**John 11:41** Then they took away the stone *from the place* where the dead man was lying. And Jesus lifted up *His* eyes and said, "Father, I thank You that You have heard Me. <sup>42</sup> And I know that You always hear Me, **but because of the people who are standing by I said *this*, that they may believe that You sent Me.**" <sup>43</sup> Now when He had said these things, He cried with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come forth!"

Christ Jesus understood the reality of God's 'secret place' (*not secret doctrine*) having read of it often in the Old Testament.

**Psalm 91:1** He who dwells in **the secret place** of the Most High Shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty.

**Psalm 31:19** How great is Your goodness, Which You have stored up for those who fear You, Which You have wrought for those who take refuge in You, Before the sons of men!

**20 You hide them in the secret place of Your presence** from the conspiracies of man; **You keep them secretly in a shelter** from the strife of tongues.

**Psalm 27:4** One thing I have asked from the Lord, that I shall seek: That I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, To behold the beauty of the Lord And to **meditate** in His temple.

5 For in the day of trouble He will conceal me in His tabernacle; **In the secret place** of His tent He will hide me; He will lift me up on a rock.

Even in the New Heaven and Earth yet to come Christians will have an individualized and 'secret' relationship with Christ.

**Revelation 2:17** "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes I will give some of the hidden manna to eat. And I will give him a white stone, and on the stone **a new name written which no one knows except him who receives it.**" "

I believe that name known only to the individual and his savior symbolizes that even in the midst of the wonderful fellowship of our brothers and sisters in Christ in eternity each of us will have our own special, individual and intimate friendship with our savior.

We arrive at the inescapable conclusion that we must keep our perceptions of our own spiritual growth a secret between ourselves and our Lord for at least two reasons.

**Reason #1** We cannot initially be sure if what we are perceiving as personal spiritual growth is real or is merely a feeling, a kind of 'religious intoxication'. We cannot know for certain that our inner experience is genuine spiritual growth until we see concrete results in our everyday lives. Those results will not appear in the way that others view or treat us but, rather, will be in the way in which we view and treat others. If the inward feelings we identify as spiritual progress aren't 'rewarded openly' by God (*evidenced by viewing and treating others with more compassion and authentic humility*) we were simply mistaking this 'religious intoxication' or spiritual conceit for spiritual growth.

**Reason #2** Even if our inward results are truly genuine we can forfeit their beneficial effect in our lives and back track in our spiritual progress. This would happen by yielding to our vanity's need to boast of our growth in the guise of our 'testimony' about it or by means of deliberate public displays of our newfound 'spirituality' with the intention of assuring that others are aware of our sudden 'Christ likeness'.

This command of Christ is, in my personal experience, the most neglected requirement in the lives of otherwise obedient Christians. It is not easy to remember and it even harder to maintain consistently. But observance of this command of Christ is vital to our spiritual growth.

“... the true indicator of spiritual well-being is growth in the ability to love God and people. If we can do this without the practice of any particular spiritual disciplines, then we should by all means skip them. **We are free of the need to impress god or anyone else with our spiritual commitment.**

*The Life You've Always Wanted”, John Ortberg. Page 45*

## *6. Evidence Of True Spiritual Growth*

Spiritual immaturity is revealed by our actions not by our spiritual knowledge.

**1 Corinthians 3:1** And I, brethren, could not speak to you as to spiritual men, but as to men of flesh, as to infants in Christ.

2 I gave you milk to drink, not solid food; for **you were not yet able to receive it.** **Indeed, even now you are not yet able,**

3 for you are still fleshly. For since there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not fleshly, and are you not walking like mere men?

**John 16:12** (*Jesus speaking*) 12 “I have many more things to say to you, but you **cannot** bear them now.

13 “But when He, the Spirit of truth, comes, He will guide you into all the truth; for He will not speak on His own initiative, but whatever He hears, He will speak; and He will disclose to you what is to come.

The process of seeking wisdom is as important as the revelation that lies at the end of the trek, itself. The search refines our motives for desiring knowledge and we find that we have been changed more by the journey than by the reply to our inquiry.

God is teaching us that Christianity is more than just "Bible Trivia." He proclaims clearly that He wants us to know Him personally, not simply to memorize a set of theological propositions.

Scripture also does not specify that it is only secular information that requires this warning. In truth, spiritual learning, without a Christ like attitude, can be the most injurious experience of all. For this reason when we ask for knowledge, God often imparts love instead: love that is birthed in the "peace that passes understanding" (Philippians 4:7); love that grows by trusting a Person, not simply accumulating religious data.

The Master Teacher orchestrates the events in our lives in order to change our hearts, rather than allowing us to simply amuse ourselves with theological academics. God has enrolled us all in the theological seminary called life.

**Deuteronomy 8:2** And you shall remember that the LORD your God led you all the way these forty years in the wilderness, to humble you *and* test you, to know what *was* in your heart, whether you would keep His commandments or not. <sup>3</sup>So He humbled you, allowed you to hunger, and fed you with manna which you did not know nor did your fathers know, **that He might make you know** that man shall not live by bread alone; but man lives by every *word* that proceeds from the mouth of the LORD.

(NKJV)

**The New Testament way is learning by obedient doing**

**John 7:16** So Jesus answered them and said ...<sup>17</sup> **"If anyone is willing to do His will, he will know of the teaching, whether it is of God or whether I speak from Myself.**

**John 8:31** So Jesus was saying ... **"If you continue in My word, then you are truly disciples of Mine; **32 and you will know** the truth, and the truth will make you free."**

**Hebrews 5:14** But solid food is for the mature, **who because of practice** have their senses trained to discern good and evil. *NASB95*

**Spiritual growth cannot occur without trial and productive error.**

**Acts 16:6** They passed through the ... region, having been **forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia;**

**7 ... they were trying to go into Bithynia, and the Spirit of Jesus did not permit them;**

**Acts 16:8** and passing by Mysia, they came down to Troas. <sup>9</sup> A vision appeared to Paul in the night: ...<sup>10</sup> When he had seen the vision, immediately we sought to go into Macedonia, **concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them.**

NASB95

God is eager, not reluctant, to accompany us in our everyday life. We simply need to get used to including Him.

**Hebrews 5:12** For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need *someone* to teach you again the first principles of the oracles of God; and you have come to need milk and not solid food. <sup>13</sup> For everyone who partakes *only* of milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, for he is a babe. <sup>14</sup> But solid food belongs to those who are of full age, *that is*, those who **by reason of use** have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil.

God told the Israelites that He would bring them into the Promised Land and described it as 'a land of milk and honey' (*Leviticus 20:24*).

In the same way we seek a continuing experience with God that could be described poetically as giving the nutritional strength of milk with the sweetness of honey.

However a glass filled with grass is not a very appetizing. The grass must first be processed through the cow to become milk. A spoon full of plant pollen is also not very appealing. The pollen must first be processed by the bee to become honey.

In the same way the spiritual facts we 'learn' are not really learned until they are internalized through our experience of our everyday lives. You may have heard that 'you are what you eat'. That statement is untrue or at least is incomplete. In reality you are what you digest. The undigested portion is disposed of without strengthening your body in any way. It is only through the crucible of our ordinary lives that potential spiritual strength is processed into realized spiritual strength and growth.

**What Is 'Hearing' God?**

Does God talk back? Absolutely. I have never heard Him speak to me in an audible voice yet He gives peace when considering one option compared to another. He can be relentlessly insistent by an inner feeling when I really should apologize or really should turn that TV program off. He really can remind me that he values me even when the world wants to convince me that I'm worthless. He does all this without a lightening bolt from heaven or an angelic visitation or an audible, disembodied voice.

**Isaiah 50:4** The Lord God has given Me the tongue of disciples, That I may know how to sustain the weary one with a word. He awakens Me morning by morning, **He awakens My ear to listen as a disciple.**

5 The Lord God has opened My ear; And I was not disobedient Nor did I turn back.

### **The credentials of spiritual maturity**

**James 3:13** Who *is* wise and understanding among you? **Let him show by good conduct that his works are done in the meekness of wisdom.** <sup>14</sup> But if you have bitter envy and self-seeking in your hearts, do not boast and lie against the truth. <sup>15</sup> This wisdom does not descend from above, but *is* earthly, sensual, demonic. <sup>16</sup> For where envy and self-seeking *exist*, confusion and every evil thing *are* there.

**James 3:17** But the **wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle**, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality and without hypocrisy. <sup>18</sup> Now the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.

**1 John 4:20** If someone says, "I love God," and hates his brother, he is a liar; **for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, how can he love God whom he has not seen?** <sup>21</sup> And this commandment we have from Him: that he who loves God *must* love his brother also.

**Galatians 5:22** But **the fruit of the Spirit** is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, <sup>23</sup> gentleness, self-control. Against such there is no law. <sup>24</sup> And those *who are* Christ's have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. <sup>25</sup> If we live in the Spirit, let us also walk in the Spirit. <sup>26</sup> Let us not become conceited, provoking one another, envying one another.

Never give in to discouragement. God promises to see you through.

**Philippians 1:6** *For I am confident of this very thing, that He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus.*

In this lesson we have considered the following topics

1. **Our Need For Spiritual Growth**
2. **Choosing To Develop Spiritual Habits**
3. **Patience Is Required In Order To Experience Spiritual Growth**
4. **Unreliable Indicators Of Inner Spiritual Growth**
5. **Evidence Of Self-Righteousness**
6. **Evidence Of True Spiritual Growth**