

Topic 6: A Disciple Grows

Becoming More Christ-Like

“Being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.”

—Philippians 1:6

You go to your 20-year reunion and, for the most part, it's what you expected: People acting like their lives are better than they really are. Balding classmates trying to one-up each other. Ex-cheerleaders still trying to bask in their high-school glory days. You smile and shake your head. But then, you talk with Eddie, the biggest, most obnoxious jerk from your graduating class. He's had a spiritual conversion. Now, he's humble and genuine. You are stunned at the change.

The next week, while waiting for your daughter to finish her dance class, you're scrolling around on social media on your smart phone. Someone's posted a link to a video about a young woman with a horrific

past. As she tells her story, you marvel at how full of joy she is. When she talks convincingly about the Lord giving her the grace to let go of her bitterness and forgive her abuser, you find yourself wiping away tears, genuinely touched by her story.

The promise of the gospel is more than a clean slate with God and the promise of heaven when we die. The gospel gives us radical new life *now*. Being a disciple of Jesus is stepping into that new life, following Jesus, experiencing his transforming presence. “Follow me,” Jesus said, “and I will make you become . . .” (Mark 1:17, *ESV*). In other words, “If you pursue me, expect your life to change.”



In the previous topic, we looked at what it means for a disciple to know Christ and his teaching. We talked about the importance of learning God's Word. However, it's not enough to have only head knowledge of Jesus and the Bible. The goal of the spiritual life isn't accumulating Bible knowledge—the goal is experiencing spiritual transformation!

Bible Study



1. Describe someone you know who has grown spiritually. What did that person act like before and after that growth? How has spiritual growth changed your own life?

2. Consider these passages that speak of God's desire to grow us up in the faith, and make us like his Son:

- ▶ "And as the Spirit of the Lord works within us, we become more and more like him" (2 Corinthians 3:18, TLB).
- ▶ "My dear children, for whom I am again in the pains of childbirth until Christ is formed in you" (The apostle Paul, writing in Galatians 4:19).
- ▶ "But the Holy Spirit produces this kind of fruit in our lives: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control" (Galatians 5:22–23, NLT).
- ▶ "Let your roots grow down into him, and let your lives be built on him. Then your faith will grow strong in the truth you were taught, and you will overflow with thankfulness" (Colossians 2:7, NLT).

A Definition of *Disciple*

A disciple is a person who follows Jesus—to *know* Jesus and his teaching; to *grow* more like Jesus; and to *go* for Jesus, serving others and making new disciples.

What do these verses say about the Lord and his desire for us?

3. The apostle Paul writes, “train yourself to be godly” (1 Timothy 4:7; the NASB renders this phrase “discipline yourself for the purpose of godliness”). What do you think Paul means? Why do you think this is hard?
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It’s worth noting that the present tense verb Paul uses here (translated “train” or “discipline”) is the Greek word from which we get our English term “gymnasium.” In other words, Paul is insisting that we give our souls a regular workout! Just as we go to the gym to exercise our bodies, we are to engage in spiritual exercises that will strengthen and firm up our souls.

For more information on spiritual disciplines, see Topics 21–30 in Chapter Five.

Such spiritual practices (or holy habits) are often called spiritual disciplines. They are everything from solitude and silence, Bible reading and prayer, to giving and service. Any

regular activity that we intentionally practice in order to open ourselves up to the Lord’s transforming presence can be considered a spiritual discipline.

Just as physical exercise leads to strength and health and fitness, in the same way spiritual exercises, properly understood and utilized, can help us grow to become like Christ.

A wrong view of spiritual disciplines	A right view of spiritual disciplines
Something for monks, nuns, and church leaders	Something for every Christ-follower
Something I am supposed to do for God	A way I can be with God
The goal is doing	The goal is becoming
Performed out of guilt (a “have to”)	Practiced out of gladness (a “get to”)
An end in themselves	A means to an end—being in God’s transforming presence
A sign of spiritual maturity	A means to spiritual maturity



Misconceptions about Growing in God

Transformation Myths	Transformation Truths
Growth is automatic for believers.	Growth has to be pursued.
Maturity is an event or destination.	Maturity is a lifelong process, a journey.
Transformation is entirely up to God.	Transformation ultimately depends on God, but it also requires my participation.
Spiritual progress is mostly about finding and learning the right spiritual information.	Information is one part; “train(ing)” (1 Timothy 4:7), “working out” (Philippians 2:12) and “do(ing)” (James 1:22) are also indispensable. We have to live the truth we know.
Transformation comes from <i>trying</i> hard.	Transformation is the result of consistent <i>training</i> and constant <i>trusting</i> God to empower you.
Following Christ means engaging in a lot of spiritual activities.	The goal of the spiritual life isn't activity; it's intimacy! <i>Am I learning to love God and love others more and more? Am I taking on the character of Christ?</i>
God should work in my life exactly the way he's working in another person's life.	Spiritual growth will vary from person to person and from season to season.

4. How is spiritual growth and maturity progressing in your life? Take a few minutes and work through this chart. As you do, consider not just beliefs, but your actions. For example, you may recognize that God's Word is important, but are you reading it?

Tool for Spiritual Growth	Minor factor	Somewhat instrumental	Indispensable to growth
God's Word	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10		
The indwelling Spirit of God	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10		
Relationships/Community	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10		
Trials and crises	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10		
Dramatic miracles	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10		
The passage of time	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10		
Practicing spiritual disciplines	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10		
Meeting with a mentor	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10		
Retreats/Mission trips	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10		
Prayer	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10		
Other: _____	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10		



a. Which of the tools of growth from the chart are you most familiar with? Least familiar with? Did your scoring in any way correspond to how familiar you are with the tool?

b. How does Philippians 1:6, our memory verse for this topic, speak to the whole issue of spiritual growth? What encouragement do you take from it?

c. Referring to the spiritual-growth tools in the chart on page 53, which tool would you like to utilize more in your own spiritual growth? Why? What is one step you can take today toward implementing this tool in your life?



Take-Home Reflections

From Unbelief to Christ-likeness

It's not a cliché. It's a fact: The spiritual life *is* a journey. Coming to Christ and growing to maturity in him is a lifelong process.

At the risk of oversimplifying and over-generalizing, here are some very common, often-observed stages in the spiritual life:

Separated from Christ		New Life in Christ		
unbelief →		† faith	→ growing pains → effective service	
Skeptic critical, combative	Seeker curious, cautious	New believer confused, childlike	Disciple committed, concerned about kingdom matters	Disciple-maker Christ-like catalyst for impacting others
What a person in this stage might say:				
"With so much evil in the world, how can you possibly believe in God?"	"I'm so tired of living this way. There must be more to life."	"Where's that verse about God helping those who help themselves?"	"I am praying for an open door to have a spiritual discussion with my neighbor."	"I want to start a discipleship group with two younger women."
What Jesus says to this person:				
"Come!" (to me)	"Repent and believe!" (in me)	"Follow (after me) and become (like me)!"	"Go!" (for me)	
What someone in this stage needs:				
Friendships with authentic believers who model the gospel	A safe place to ask questions about Jesus and his teaching	Relationships with mature believers who demonstrate and explain the basics of the faith	Help in identifying gifts, opportunities to serve with supervision/feedback	A team of co-laborers, lots of encouragement, freedom to fail

Some people might object to making a distinction between "believers" and "disciples." Our intention is to draw attention to the scores of new believers who have not been trained yet to actually follow Jesus. They haven't been shown how to allow Christ to transform their attitudes, values, actions, habits, relationships, finances, etc. So there are true believers who have yet to begin following him and become disciples in the truest sense of the word.



Life Application

An important part of discipleship is learning how to apply God's truths to your life. Below are just a few ways you can start thinking about what you've learned and apply it to your daily life.

1. Memorize our memory verse:

"Being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus" (Philippians 1:6).

2. Read Romans 5:3–5. Then spend a few minutes journaling your thoughts about the current problems in your life and how God might be using those to shape you into the image of Christ.

"It is the fire of suffering that brings forth the gold of godliness."
—Madame Guyon

3. Wrestle with one or two of these questions:

- ▶ What about the idea that "we become like those we spend a lot of time with"? What are the implications of this for a follower of Jesus?
- ▶ The next time trials come, instead of asking the natural, "Why me, God?" question, try asking, "What are you trying to teach me here, Lord?" What kind of difference could this make?
- ▶ In the physical realm, training is easier when you have a trainer and training partners. How do you think this principle might apply to the spiritual realm?
- ▶ Certain things can stunt a person's physical growth. What factors might hinder a person's spiritual growth?