

## How to Grow as a Christian

Yesterday I participated in the funeral for Sherry Peck in Chambersburg. Her husband Glenn and I were in Seminary together, went to family camp together, ate together in each other's homes, played Ping-Pong and Uno, celebrated with each other in the birth of our children, and shared a common faith in our saving and miracle--working God.

At Sherry's funeral yesterday I talked about her role as wife, mother, grandmother, cook, and homemaker. I talked about her gift of hospitality and her offer of friendship to many people. I noted that she was a woman of strong convictions and an enduring faith, a faith that remained strong throughout her horrific battle with a malignant brain tumor. But the one thing I said about Sherry that sets her apart from many other believers was that even with all the other things she did, Sherry was constantly committed to learning and growing in her relationship with God. Sherry constantly wanted to go deeper, reach higher, know God better, have a breadth and depth of relationship with Him that would enable her to serve Him and to become a more effective ambassador for Him in the lives of others. In the words of A. W. Tozer she lived her life in "pursuit of God." Or, in the words of Tommy Tenny, she was a "God Chaser."

One Scripture that God gave me in reference to our friend Sherry was the same one I shared with you two weeks ago. Paul says in Philippians 3:10, "I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death." I believe Sherry's prayer was similar in the midst of her illness and that it was fully answered by the time of her death. She became more and more like Jesus in her sufferings and she experienced the power of his resurrection at the time of her death.

But the question I have for you this morning is: Are you in pursuit of God? Are you a God chaser? It seems to me that this is not a calling just for exceptional Christians like Sherry, and not just for pastors and teachers, but is a standing mandate for every Christian. It should be a part of what Watchman Nee called the "Normal Christian Life." Theologian, Karl Barth said, "Biblical study . . . is not merely the affair of a few specialists but fundamentally of all the members of the community. . . . it might some day be asked of any Christian to give an answer to those without concerning 'the hope that is in you' (I Peter

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3:15) For this no little knowledge of the Bible, and indeed some understanding and therefore study, are indispensable. The statement: "I am a mere layman and not a theologian" is evidence not of humility but of indolence."\* And, in case you didn't know, "indolence" is another word for willful laziness. In other words, Barth is saying that it is the business of every Christian to be constantly seeking to learn and to grow in his knowledge of Christ and in her relationship with Christ. The apostle Paul agrees. In writing to his protégé Timothy, Paul says in II Timothy 2:15, "Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved by him, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly explaining the word of truth."

What is this supposed to look like in our lives today? If we would be learning and growing as Christians, what sort of things do we need to be doing individually and collectively. Individually, I believe every Christian needs to be reading the Bible and investing the time necessary to understand what she is reading. We should be using good study bibles with notes to help us understand or to interpret what may be unclear. There are also one volume and multi-volume Bible commentaries or Bible commentaries available on the Internet to help us study. As much as possible we all should strive to be good students of the word of God. If reading is difficult for some of us, we might want to take steps to learn how to read better or to invest time listening to Bible teachers on the radio or on tapes or DVDs. If anyone needs guidance in knowing what teachers to trust, ask me and I would be glad to advise.

In addition to studying the Bible we also need to invest some time meditating on the truths we find there. We need to ask God to show us things in His word that we need to pay special attention to. And then pay attention to whatever the Holy Spirit brings before us. We need to sit with that word until we can see how it applies to our lives.

And then we also need to obey the word that God speaks to our hearts. James 1:22 says, "Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says." In summary we each need to read or listen to the words of Scripture daily. We each need to make an effort to understand what we are reading or hearing. We each need to meditate on what we are reading or hearing until we can see how God would have us apply it to our lives. And we each need to obey the word that God speaks to us in this process. In other words, anyone who is

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serious about being a Christian needs to have a living and transformational relationship with the word of God. A "normal" Christian needs to have a living and transformational relationship with the world of God. If the word isn't changing and growing us, we aren't dealing with it adequately. **Everybody needs the Bible.**

As individual Christians, we need to become students of the word of God. But studying the Bible alone, as important and as valuable as that is, is not the only thing we need to do to be good students of the word. Karl Barth makes a concise statement about this when he says, "For none is infallible, and all need to be subject to the control of the rest."\*\*\* In II Peter 1:20, Peter says, "Knowing this first, that no prophecy of the scripture is of any private interpretation." In other words, interpreting Scripture is something best done in community under the leadership of the Holy Spirit. That's why I believe every Christian ought to be involved in either a Sunday School Class or a small group Bible Study on a regular basis--or both. I know from my own experience that most of my understanding of the Bible and growth as a Christian has occurred and continues to occur in or through small group Bible Studies, prayer groups, and Sunday School Classes. I would go so far as to say that God seems to prefer to work in such small group settings. It doesn't have to be a large class, for Jesus said in Matthew 18:20 ". . . where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them."

So I believe that each of us needs to be reading or listening to the Bible at home and studying, praying, and obeying the Bible as individuals. I also believe that each of us needs to be involved in small group Bible Studies, Sunday School Classes, and regularly sitting under the preaching of God's word. I further believe that the more each of us progresses in knowing and being transformed by God's word, the stronger and more effective we will be together as a church. God will be able to use us in proportion to our intimacy with His word. Jesus reminds us how necessary this is when He said, **"Man shall not live by bread alone but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God,"** (Matthew 4:4).

To grow as Christians, we need to feed on the word of God. Secondly, we need to learn to take everything to the Lord in prayer. I Peter 3:15 begins, "But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord." How do we do that? I believe that the desire to set apart Christ as Lord in our hearts comes through reading and/or hearing the word of God, or

through seeing the effects of the word of God in the lives of others. The Holy Spirit blesses the word planted in us and makes it grow from the inside out. Then, by the operation of the word and Spirit of God, we find ourselves really wanting to be Christians, really wanting Jesus Christ to be Lord of our lives. The next step is to pray. We begin to talk to the Lord and we learn to watch and listen for His reply and for His guidance. We need to keep talking to the Lord and listening to the Lord until the desire to live under His lordship reaches critical mass, until He shows us what to do. You may notice that this doesn't generally happen all at once. It's a process, a process that we properly call prayer. Prayer is not just asking God for stuff. Prayer is talking to God and listening and watching for God's communication back to us. Prayer is thinking about our lives and our circumstances--mulling them over in our minds and asking God for clarity. It is sitting with stuff until God shows us the next step. Prayer is the process of having our brains rewired by the Holy Spirit, until we are thinking and acting according to His will and not our own.

The other thing we need to recognize and take into account here is that the process of setting apart Jesus Christ in our hearts as Lord, is never over and done with as long as we live on earth. Because we each have an onboard human nature that wants to do its own thing, and because there is a Devil who likes to set little traps and roadside bombs for us along the way, and because the culture we live in is often pushing us in the opposite direction, surrendering our lives to the Lordship of Christ is a daily and sometimes hourly struggle.

I read Psalm 59:16 in my morning devotions one day last week. David prays, "But I will sing of your strength, in the morning I will sing of your love; for you are my fortress, my refuge in times of trouble." I asked myself the question, "Why in the morning? What's so special about singing of God's strength and God's love in the morning? The answer came back to me: "because it sets the agenda for the rest of the day!" The challenge for every Christian is to set apart Christ in his or her heart as Lord, an action that must be remembered and renewed day after day. **We need to set apart Christ as Lord in our hearts everyday. We need to set Him apart through prayer.**

If we are going to grow strong as Christians we need to become good students of God's word and we need to practice the discipline of yielding our lives to Christ in prayer daily. A third thing we need in order

to grow strong as Christians is to cultivate a Christ-like character and way of life. I Peter 3:16 says, "keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander."

Someone may ask: Given the fact that we all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God, how are we to keep clear consciences before the Lord? There are two facets to this. The first is forgiveness. We need to live everyday under the shadow and in the victory of the cross. We need to be quick to confess our sins and firm to claim the forgiveness purchased for us by our Lord. We must not give Satan time to rub our noses in our sins and to destroy our relationship with Christ by covering us with shame. As soon as we know we have sinned we need to take that sin to the Lord and to the cross for forgiveness. If we confess our sins, God is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. (I John 1:9). **We must live and breathe the forgiveness of Jesus Christ.**

The second facet of keeping clear consciences before the Lord is to walk close enough to Him in His word, in prayer and in supportive fellowship with each other, that we find His strength to live godly lives. Sin may be inevitable in our lives but we do not need to allow it to define us or overwhelm us. In Christ we are forgiven and **in Christ we have the power to be changed and to live lives that bring Him honor.**

If anyone would grow as a Christian she must nourish her life with Scripture, he must pursue the Lord in prayer and draw upon the power of the Holy Spirit to live a Christ-like life. May each of us become a pursuer of God, a God chaser, that we may truly know Him and be able to explain to others the hope we have within us.

\*Church Dogmatics, 2010, V.1, 330, Hendrickson Publishers, Peabody, Massachusetts.

\*\*Ibid.

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### How to Grow as a Christian

**I Peter 3:15-22**

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