

How to Grow

I believe everyone wants their future to be better than their past. I don't talk to many people who tell me, "Boy, I've had it so good in my life. I hope everything falls apart soon." I'm hoping to develop a debilitating drug habit before I die. My financial goals? Bankruptcy! People don't stand at the altar and say, "I promise to love for 5 years, then all bets are off!" No, we all intend to make our future as good as it can be and yet few people do. This is a series about the barriers that keep us making our future better than our past and how we can break through those barriers.

At its heart, Christianity is a faith that believes that everyone's future can be better than their past. This was the trajectory of the Apostle Paul in the chapter we just read. First, he writes about his past, both his accomplishments and faults. But then he writes this, **"¹³Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, ¹⁴I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus."** Over these next five weeks, we are going to be looking forward to your future.

But in order to get there, we have to start with where you are right now. During this series, we'll be talking to four different types of people all of whom are present in this room—four types of people are at different stages of a spiritual journey.

The first stage is those of you who are *looking for something*. Years ago, people coming to church would have said they're looking for God. Most of them would have had

some kind of background in the church and knew what to expect, so when their life hit rock bottom, they knew deep down that the hole they felt could be filled by God.

But times have changed. More and more people didn't grow up in church so it's not necessarily the first place they go when they're looking for something. People today are just as likely to go to Yoga or Crossfit or turn to politics as they are to go to church to try to find meaning. But it still happens. I know people in this very congregation who started coming because they were lonely, because their marriage was on the rocks or because they felt their lives lacked purpose.

I don't know what got you here or watching our livestream today, if you're looking for something, but I'm glad you're here. And I believe that if you hang around, you'll find what you're looking for and more.

The second group is those of you who have *found it*. At one point, you were looking for something—feeling a bit lost in the world, and a friend invited you to church and you realized that Jesus fulfilled what you were looking for. You didn't have other options so you decided to give it a try. Or maybe you grew up in church and you found it early on.

But, that's as far as it's gotten. You feel good when you come to church, but you still don't know much about the Bible. No one has invested in teaching you so most of what you learn comes through Instagram Memes, Facebook videos or the latest pop-theology blogger. If this is you, I'm glad you're here and I think you'll find what you need to take the next step.

The third group of people is most likely the largest group here today—I would guess half of you. Not only have you found it, but you're *following it*. You've been a Christian for a while and have heard countless sermons. You probably even read your Bible at home. You're faithfully committed to Jesus. If that's you, I'm glad you're here.

And finally, there's a small group of you who are "*all about it!*" Everything in your life centers on Jesus. Not only do you know your Bible, but you live it. You love people selflessly. You even shovel your neighbor's sidewalk because that's what Jesus would do! If that's you, I'm glad you're here.

No matter where you are on this journey, you will experience times when you feel like you hit a wall. In fact, that wall can sometimes seem like a dead-end. No matter where you are on your journey, you can respond one of three ways.

You might just *stay stuck*. For instance, if you put yourself in the "found it" category, when you hit the wall, you might just settle for a life of attending church and going through them motions, but never going beyond that. You just drift through life and drift through faith with no real purpose.

But when some of you hit the wall, *you turn back*. Let's say someone hasn't been in church since confirmation when they were teenagers, but now they feel their life lacks purpose. But they go to church and no one really talks to them. The message seems to only be for long-time Christians, so it doesn't really resonate. Maybe they come for a while and try to get involved in a small group, but the small group is cliquey and they end

up looking somewhere other than church. Chances are, down the road, another friend is going to invite them to church, and they'll say, "No. I already tried that. It doesn't work."

We're going to focus here next week. So, if you're here and you're not sure where you stand on this Jesus thing, if you're not yet sure if you can buy into it, but you're looking for *something*. Next week is especially for you.

So, you can respond in one of those two ways, or a third option is to keep going and break through. No matter where you are on your journey, there's no trick to growth. There's no spiritual life-hack that will magically make things easy. The reality is, your future isn't automatically better than your past. If you want your future to be better than your past, it takes effort and perseverance. Virtually nothing in life gets better when you just let it be. Maybe wine...or cheese. But even then, you have create the right conditions for them to age well. Let me give you examples.

First, physical fitness. Maybe you've noticed that it's easy to get unhealthy. IN fact, here's the strategy for being unhealthy. First, don't exercise. (I can do that) Second, eat whatever I want. (Piece of cake—literally—that's what I want to eat). If I do these things, it won't take long at all. I'll gain weight, my cholesterol will go up and I'll feel terrible. And all I had to do is what comes naturally.

But if I want to get in shape and maintain it, I have to work. I have to discipline myself. And I can't just do it for a day and expect anything to change. I have to keep doing it for the rest of my life. The good thing is that when you get into shape, it gets easier.

When you first start running, it's hard. And it hurts. But there are some crazy people who just don't feel right if they don't get in a run. But you don't get quickly or easily.

Here's another example. There are some people who aren't motivated by *personal* improvement. You want to make a difference in the world. Well, the same thing is true, *it's easy to change the world, but much harder to improve it.*

Jacob Riis was a Danish journalist who came to New York City in 1870. At first, he found it difficult to find work, so he found a place to live in the slums of New York. This was the time when many immigrants were coming to the U.S. the majority of them through Ellis Island. Then they would settle in New York City. Because of immigration, the population was exploding and the city couldn't keep up. This led to harsh conditions for the new immigrants who were forced to live in those slums.

Riis went back to Denmark for a time and while he was there, became a Christian. His Christian faith then motivated him to go back to New York and advocate for the immigrants living in the slums.

The average middle-class citizens were aware of the tenements, but never had to walk by them so they figured the conditions were OK. Riis brought awareness to the conditions of these slums by taking pictures and exposing the conditions of the slums to the average person. In 1888, he published a book called "How the Other Half Lives" with descriptions and pictures of the conditions in these slums. [slum pics]

The book was a hit, but change was glacial. I don't know the context for it, but this quote is attributed to Riis and it's how he found the strength to continue when there didn't seem to be any results, *"I look at a stone cutter hammering away at his rock, perhaps a hundred times without as much as a crack showing in it. Yet at the hundred-and-first blow it will split in two, and I know it was not the last blow that did it, but all that had gone before."* His work led to the New York Tenement Housing Act and inspired legislation around the country that promoted safe housing and workplaces.

Whether it's physical health or working for the good of society, it takes work and perseverance. The same is true for personal and spiritual growth. Even when you have the best intentions, there will be times when it feels like you've hit that wall. And we often get idea that we should be able to break right through that wall and keep on going. And there are times that works. But usually, reality is more like the stone cutter chipping away, one blow after another, until finally you break through.

This is true no matter where you are in life. But while there's no magic wand, there *is* a way. And there are common ingredients that spark breakthrough. Keep in mind that these are *ingredients*, not *steps* to growth. They don't come in any particular order, but these are the elements that show up in all growth. Blow by blow, they weaken the barriers you face.

The first ingredient is right knowledge. *Right knowledge gives you a picture of the world as it is*. Right knowledge is critical. Think about it as a map (or GPS today).

Whenever I'm going somewhere unfamiliar, even if I have a GPS, I get a good look at the destination and the route. But it's more than just thoughts I put in my head. That mental map reorients me. It changes how I think as I'm driving. When I study that route and internalize it, rather than just relying on a voice telling me to turn here, it's natural to me. I know what's coming.

That's what knowledge is. And knowledge starts with the Bible. Hebrews 4:12 tells us, **"¹²The word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. ¹³Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account."** If God created everything, then who better to tell us what's true?

But this goes beyond the Bible. We also need to know ourselves—our temptations, longings, strengths and weaknesses. And we need to know how the world works. That also comes from the Bible, but also from science, social science, history and the experience of many people who have gone before us. The more complete our picture of reality, the better we'll be able to become what God created us to be.

It starts by aligning ourselves with what God says and being honest with ourselves about our limitations. When we can do that, we're on the right path.

The second ingredient is right affections. *Right affections mean that you love the right things in the right order.* Have you noticed that it's easy to know what we *should* do

and still not do it. How many times has someone said, “Would you like dessert?” and you said, “I really shouldn’t,” but you do anyway? Then we joke about it. But why do we do that? Well, we do it because we other people think we’re not gluttons and we’re conscious of our health, even though it’s not actually a priority. If we were being honest, we would just come out with it—I value dessert more than my health!

You see, even when we know we should eat healthier, we don’t because the comfort we get from eating is more important to us than health. But have a health scare and those priorities change—for a while at least.

Harvard Business School professor, Clayton Christensen, wrote an article in 2010 in the Harvard Business Review. He, himself graduated from Harvard Business School in 1979. He says that when he went back for his 5th anniversary, almost all of his classmates were happy. They were successful in their business ventures and hey had all married someone better looking than themselves. Things were going well.

But in the following years, he says he noticed a trend. This is what he wrote, *“Over the years I’ve watched the fates of my HBS classmates from 1979 unfold; I’ve seen more and more of them come to reunions unhappy, divorced, and alienated from their children. I can guarantee you that not a single one of the them graduated with the deliberate strategy of getting divorced and raising children who would become estranged from them. And yet a shocking number of them implemented that strategy.”*

As he thought about it, he realized their critical flaw was they had their affections in the wrong order. He says, *“They didn’t keep the purpose of their lives front and center as they decided how to spend their time, talents, and energy.”* And because of that, he says that they “invested for lives of hollow unhappiness.”

Our careers provide the most tangible, immediate sense of achievement, but investments in our family don’t pay off for a very long time. It isn’t until 20 years down the road that you can look at them and say, “Honey, we raised great children.” This what the Psalmist was getting when he wrong Psalm 90:12 says, **“¹²Teach us to number our days, that we may gain a heart of wisdom.”** You can live life for the now, but in a blink you’ll be at the end of your life and wonder where the time went.

For most of us, the problem isn’t that we love bad things. The problem is that we love things in the wrong order. It’s OK to want to achieve, but the things that give us the most immediate gratification are not the things that will cause us to look back on our lives with a sense of satisfaction. And they’re not the things that when we stand before God someday, will cause him to say, “Well done!” The things that give us instant gratification are often the very things that keep us stuck.

I doubt this is new information for anyone—maybe a good reminder. But you’re probably thinking, *“I KNOW I should focus on things that really matter. I’m open to the idea that what I’m really looking for is God. I know I should focus on the things that matter to God. But that’s easier said than done.”* How do I stay focused on that?

Well, the next two ingredients can help. The third ingredient is right practices.

Right practices are regular activities that take you the direction you want to go. There are no neutral practices. Every action, every habit, every dollar you spend, every word you say, takes you in a direction. You're getting more disciplined or less. You're getting wiser or more foolish. You're moving closer to God or further away. It's not just your beliefs or your thoughts, it's your action.

In Matthew 7, Jesus tells a parable about two men who are building houses. One was wise and built his house on a rock and the other was foolish, building his house on the sand. The men finished their houses and a great storm came and the house on the sand came crashing to the ground, but the house on the rock stood firm.

Now, Jesus tells us the difference between the wise and the foolish man. But it might not be what you think. Most people think that the wise man built his house on the teachings of the Jesus and the foolish man didn't. But that's not what Jesus says. Here's what he says, ***"²⁴Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock...²⁶But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand."*** Notice, they both *knew* the teachings of Jesus, but the wise man put them into practice and the foolish man didn't.

Knowledge is theoretical and ordering your loves is hypothetical until you put your feet on the ground and start walking. It's like knowing where you *want* to go, looking at a

map, but never going anywhere. You will never grow spiritually if you don't walk the direction you want to end up. It's just as true personally and spiritually as it is literally.

But that means changing things—getting rid of some things that we like but don't take us where we want to go. If you want to read more, you probably have to give up one of your TV shows. If you want to be more generous, you'll have to be more intentional with money. If you want to invest in your kids, you might have to settle for less money and work fewer hours. It's easy to say you *want* to grow, but nothing will change until your daily habits take you in that direction.

Now, the great thing about practice is that there is a catalytic relationship with the other ingredients. It can help you gain knowledge. And it moves your knowledge from theory to experience. It's one thing to read a book about car repair, but you can't be a mechanic until you get under the hood.

Daily practices also form habits and habits shape your affections. Coffee drinkers, when you first tasted coffee, you probably didn't love it. But you started drinking it because all the adults told you that grown-ups drink coffee. (or you wanted to stay awake in college) But once you started drinking it, you acquired a taste for it...and then a craving...and then a deep affection for it. And some people love the subtle nuances of coffees from different parts of the world. It started with practice and became a love.

Now, if you want the change to stick, you need to take it further. And that brings us to the fourth ingredient—the right community. *The right community is a group of people who care more about your character than your comfort.*

Ask someone in recovery how important the right community is. It makes all the difference in the world. People who study recidivism rates—which is the rates of people who have been in prison who go back to prison—tell us that the number one factor determining whether someone will re-offend is who they choose to hang around with. If they go back to their old group of friends, it's almost certain they will re-offend. But if they're able to change their thinking and forge a new life, with a group of people with healthy habits and patterns, they can change.

And what's true for ex-offenders is just an exaggerated form of what's true for all of us. Researchers studied the effects of social networking—not just the digital kind and found some very interesting results. For instance, if a friend of yours becomes obese, you are 45% likelier than chance to gain weight over the next 2-4 years. Not only that, but if a friend of a friend becomes obese, you are 20% likelier than chance to gain weight whether you know them or not.

Your community is powerful. This shouldn't be a big surprise. It's all over the pages of Scripture. Proverbs 13:20, **“²⁰Walk with the wise and become wise, for a companion of fools suffers harm.”** Proverbs 22:24, **“²⁴Do not make friends with a hot-tempered**

person, do not associate with one easily angered, ²⁵or you may learn their ways and get yourself ensnared.”

The right community can be a friend group, small group, mentor, accountability partner or discipleship group. But the right community is oriented toward the truth. It doesn't allow people to deceive themselves. It graciously challenges and corrects. It encourages and most importantly, models the kind of life God wants for all of us.

It's easy to make two critical errors when it comes to community. The first is to associate with the *wrong* people. It's not even people who will lead you into trouble, but it could be people who just don't challenge you to be your best.

The second error is to isolate yourself and think things are going to get better. With the right community you can keep chipping away at the wall until you break through. Without it, you'll likely give up very quickly.

Well, we've covered a lot of ground today, but I want to leave you with something from earlier. All growth has to take a long-term view. What do you want people to say about you in 5 years? In 10 years? When you're looking back at the end of your life, what do you want to see? Or more important, when you stand before God someday, what do you want him to see? Does the path you're on, lead you there?

As we get ready to close the service today, I know there are some of you who are disappointed with where you are. You thought you'd be further down the road, but here you are—stuck. And maybe you even think God is disappointed with you, you've done

too much bad stuff for him to accept you. Or maybe you think he's tired of your lack of progress or the fact that you have sins that still trip you up or doubts you still wrestle with. If that's the case, don't let that be the barrier that keeps you from moving forward. God is a gracious God, who wants to forgive and wants to heal and wants to see you become what you're meant to be.