

Keys to Spiritual Growth

Praying, Proclaiming and Witnessing

2 Peter 3:18

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August 13, 2006

Praying, Proclaiming and Witnessing¹

Scripture

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

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

Introduction

Did you know that great musicians never stop trying to improve?

The great concert pianist, Arthur Rubinstein, used to say that if he missed one day of practice, he noticed it in the quality of his performance. If he missed two days of practice, the critics noticed it. And if he missed three days of practice, the audience noticed it.

As you live your Christian life, do you notice improvement? Do you notice spiritual growth? Or do you notice a spiritual declension if you neglect your spiritual disciplines for a day or two?

I have been preaching a series of messages titled “Keys to Spiritual Growth,” which is designed to help you grow spiritually.

Over the previous few weeks I said that the master key to all spiritual growth is the glory of God. God has created all things—including us—for his own glory. Living for the glory of God is the master key to spiritual growth. But there are other keys as well. So far we have looked at the following keys to spiritual growth:

1. Confessing Christ as Lord
2. Aiming Our Lives at Glorifying God
3. Confessing Our Sins
4. Trusting God

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

5. Bearing Fruit
6. Praising God
7. Loving God

Lesson

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

1. Praying
2. Proclaiming
3. Witnessing

I. Praying

Praying is a vital key to spiritual growth.

We know that prayer is vital to spiritual growth, but knowing it and doing it are two different things for most of us.

Years ago I read a survey about how much time Christians spend in prayer on a daily basis. Did you know that the average Christian spends only 7 minutes each day in prayer? But what was surprising to me when I read that survey was that even though the average Christian spends only 7 minutes a day in prayer, the average pastor spends only 5 minutes a day in prayer! That was really shocking! Is it any wonder that so many Christians are not growing spiritually?

Imagine a young man named John who says he is in love with a girl named Jane. John has proclaimed to all he knows that Jane is the girl for him. She is the love of his life. She is the woman of his dreams. Do you think you would really believe him if you knew that he spent only 7 minutes a day talking to her? He says he loves her but he is so busy that he can only give her 7 minutes a day of his time. Do you think that John's relationship with Jane will grow if:

- he only spends 7 minutes a day talking to her?
- he was mechanical and rote in his relationship with her?

- he was dutiful in his relationship with her?

No! If John really loves Jane, he *delights* in her! He wants to spend time with her. He wants to spend *lots* of time with her.

In just the same way, prayer is an expression of my delight in God. I love God. I want to spend time with God. I want to spend lots of time with God. And I do so in prayer.

As we think about prayer today, let me talk about just one aspect of prayer, and that is the promise of answered prayer.

In John 14:13 Jesus says, “And I will do whatever you ask in my name.” Verse 14 repeats that great promise: “You may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it.”

Why does Jesus answer prayer? Jesus gives us the primary reason for answering prayer at the end of verse 13: “. . . so that the Son may bring glory to the Father.”

God answers prayer for his sake as well as for ours. He does it to put himself on display. Understanding that increases our confidence in prayer: we know that God answers prayer because it is an opportunity for him to receive glory.

We grow spiritually as we interact with God in prayer and see his glory on display.

The context of verse 13 shows that the disciples were greatly distressed because Jesus told them that he would be leaving them. He told them, “And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am” (John 14:3).

The disciples had relied on Jesus for so long that they feared being without him. He had provided all their resources. He provided tax money from the mouth of a fish (Matthew 17:27), and created food when they were hungry (Matthew 14:19-21). He was their beloved leader and their spiritual, theological, and economic resource. So they panicked at the thought of him leaving them.

But he left them with a tremendous promise, saying, “Don’t worry. Even though I am going, you will still have resources. Whatever you need and ask for in my name, I will do. I don’t have to be here physically in order to meet your needs.”

Now, praying in Jesus' name is more than a formula. Some people think that at the end of every prayer you have to say, "In Jesus' name, Amen." They think results are guaranteed when you say that phrase, and that the prayer doesn't get past the ceiling when you don't use that phrase.

But the proper kind of prayer involves much more than a formula.

What does it mean to pray in Jesus' name? In Scripture, the name of God embodies all that he is. When God told Moses his name, he said, "I AM WHO I AM" (Exodus 3:14).

Likewise, Jesus' name embodies all that he is. Jesus was saying, "When what you ask is consistent with who I am and what my will is, I will do it." Praying in Jesus' name is praying in accord with God's will (*cf.* 1 John 5:14).

When our requests are in line with God's sovereign plan, he will answer them—and our faith will increase. Instead of saying, "In Jesus' name, Amen," at the end of our prayers, perhaps we should say, "I pray this because I believe it to be the will of Christ." That would eliminate many selfish requests.

In our prayers we should not focus on what we want to receive, like the little boy who prayed, "God bless Mommy, and God bless Daddy," and then shouted, "And God, I would like a new bicycle! Amen."

When his mother said, "God isn't deaf," he said, "I know, but Grandma's in the next room, and *she's* hard of hearing!"

To pray in Jesus' name limits our prayers. For instance, I cannot know for sure if it is God's will for a sick person to be healed. I certainly can ask God, if it be his will, to heal the sick person. But I can confidently pray, "God, I pray that this person may be comforted, grow spiritually, and honor you in the midst of this trial. This I ask because I believe it to be the will of Jesus Christ." That request is consistent with who Christ is and what Scripture reveals about his will.

When God answers our prayers about a particular situation, we have the privilege of being part of his work and of praising him

for it. When we don't participate through prayer, we miss the opportunity to give him glory.

Occasionally, some successful people have acknowledged that whenever they came to an impasse in their work and were completely baffled, they sought wisdom from the Lord.

This was true in the life of the inventor of the telegraph, Samuel F. B. Morse. In an interview, George Hervey inquired, "Professor Morse, when you were making your experiments at the university, did you ever come to a standstill, not knowing what to do next?"

"I've never discussed this with anyone," said Morse, "so the public knows nothing about it. But now that you ask me, I'll tell you frankly—I prayed for more light."

"And did God give you the wisdom and knowledge you needed?" asked Hervey.

"Yes he did," said Morse. "That's why I never felt I deserved the honors that came to me from America and Europe because of the invention associated with my name. I had made a valuable application of the use of electrical power, but it was all through God's help. It wasn't because I was superior to other scientists. When the Lord wanted to bestow this gift on mankind, he had to use someone. I'm just grateful he chose to reveal it to me."

In view of these facts, it's not surprising that the inventor's first message over the telegraph was: "What hath God wrought!" (Numbers 23:23, *KJV*), which is, "See what God has done!" (*NIV*).

Every time you face a perplexing problem, seek wisdom from above. And when the answer comes, be sure to thank God and give him all the glory.

The primary issue in prayer is not obtaining what we want but allowing God to display his glory. If we receive what we want perpetually, that may be great, but our concern needs to be that God will do what glorifies him most. When we pray with that attitude, we will grow spiritually, and the more faithful we are in prayer, the faster we will grow. Our faith in God's power will increase as we see him work.

Let me encourage you to delight in God, and you will grow in prayer. Commit to spending time regularly in prayer each day. Find a quiet place where you can pray. And pray in Jesus' name, by which I mean that you seek to pray in accord with God's will.

II. Proclaiming

Another key to spiritual growth is proclaiming.

In the book of Acts we read that when the Gentiles heard that salvation was available to them, "they were glad and honored the word of the Lord; and all who were appointed for eternal life believed. The word of the Lord spread through the whole region" (Acts 13:48-49).

If spending time in prayer is low among Christians, reading the Bible is worse. I don't know how much time Christians spend a day reading God's word, but it cannot be more than a few minutes each day. I must confess that I am regularly surprised at how few Christians read their Bibles regularly.

Spiritual growth cannot take place without the intake of God's word. We can't grow without food, and feeding should be a daily process. To go to church on Sunday, take in a message, and hope it is enough for the whole week is like eating dinner on Sunday and saying, "Lord, that was a wonderful dinner. We pray it will hold us until next Sunday." You need to eat on Sunday, Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, and Saturday too!

The same is true spiritually: there must be a daily feeding on the word of God for optimum growth.

Several years ago I challenged the congregation at my former church to read the Bible through from Genesis to Revelation in one year. One of the members of the church took the challenge, and he systematically read through the Bible in one year. Today, he now reads his Bible through every year. And each time I see him, which is at least once a year, he testifies to what a delight it is to spend time daily reading God's word.

Keys to Spiritual Growth

Let me set that same challenge before you too today. Make a commitment to read the Bible systematically. Make a commitment to read the Bible regularly. Make a commitment to read the Bible through in one year. If that is too much for you, then read the Bible through in 2 years, or 3 years. The point is: make a commitment to read God's systematically and regularly.

But there is even greater growth in giving out the word than in feeding on it. As we proclaim the word, we cement it in our lives. In that case, the saying, "The more you give away, the more you keep" is true.

I have found that I tend to remember the things I teach to others but forget the things I read and never pass on.

Christians are to give high priority to proclaiming the word of God. When you are silent about his word, you will retard your spiritual growth.

But how do you proclaim the word of God?

For example, concerning his commandments, God said to parents in Deuteronomy 6:7-9, "Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates." The word should so fill your heart and mind that whenever you open your mouth, its truth comes out.

Jesus made a statement to all Christians in Acts 1:8b, ". . . and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." Interestingly, throughout the book of Acts we read many times that "the word of God spread" (or some similar statement in Acts 6:7; 12:24; 19:20; 28:31; etc.).

The word of God spreads when Christians talk about Christ. The word of God spreads when Christians talk about who God is and what he has done to reconcile sinners such as ourselves to himself.

The apostle Paul said to Timothy, "Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to

be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth” (2 Timothy 2:15).

The phrase “correctly handles” literally means, “cutting it straight.” Paul may have been using an analogy from his profession as a tentmaker. He made his tents by cutting patterns out of goatskin. One goat was never big enough for a tent, so the skins had to be sewn together. If the individual pieces weren’t cut correctly, the pattern wouldn’t match. So Paul was saying that unless you are careful with the individual parts of Scripture, the whole will not come together.

We are to be students of the word, filling our hearts with it. As we proclaim it, we are to pray that “the message of the Lord may spread rapidly and be honored” (2 Thessalonians 3:1).

When I was a student at the University of Cape Town a retired unmarried businessman committed his retired life to making Christ known to the students at the University of Cape Town. Each morning he would go to one of the male student dormitories in order to share God’s word with one or more students. It was quite common to get a knock on my door at about 6:00 a.m. in the morning! Bleary-eyed and rubbing the sleep out of my eyes, I would open the door, and there would be Vic!

“Good morning, Freddy!” Vic would say enthusiastically. “I have come to share God’s word with you this morning.”

Those of us who were Christians loved Vic’s early morning visits as he shared with us from the word of the living God.

We glorify God by proclaiming his word to believers and unbelievers. As we do that and practice the other keys to spiritual growth, we will become more like Christ. However, the closer we get to God, the more failures and limitations we become aware of in our lives. So we are ever pressing toward the mark (Philippians 3:14), longing for the day when “we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is” (1 John 3:2).

Make a commitment today to read God’s word systematically and regularly. Apply God’s word to every area of your life. And

then share God's word on a regular basis with people God brings into your life.

III. Witnessing

Witnessing to Christ is a natural outgrowth of proclaiming the word.

Paul illustrated that in his commitment to the needs of the Corinthian church. Second Corinthians 4 tells us he was "hard pressed on every side" (v. 8), "persecuted" (v. 9), and "always carry[ing] around in [his] body the death of Jesus" (v. 10). He repeatedly suffered and faced death for their sakes, "so that the grace [saving grace] that is reaching more and more people may cause thanksgiving to overflow to the glory of God" (v. 15). Paul entered hostile towns and confronted people because he wanted to add voices to the thanksgiving choir. He wanted more people to know of God's grace so that they could glorify him with their lives.

Perhaps the most productive thing a Christian can do is witness to Christ because it doubles the potential for glorifying God.

I still remember the first time I witnessed to Christ as a brand-new Christian. I was about nineteen years old and I was trying to explain who Christ is and what he had done to secure my salvation. The girl to whom I was witnessing asked lots of questions. I found that I could not answer some of them. The result was that I went home and studied the word of God more so that I could answer her questions. My growth in Christ started accelerating!

And that is what witnessing does for you. As you witness to Christ you have to give an answer for the hope that is in you (*cf.* 1 Peter 3:15). And if you are not able to do so effectively, you go back to the word of God in order to answer effectively.

I have a friend who says, "Non-Christians keep you sharp!" He's right, because he means that non-Christians make you give answers that are true and biblical.

Let me encourage you to find opportunities to witness to Christ. Think about someone with whom you can share the good news of the gospel of God's grace, and then do it!

Conclusion

Spiritual growth is simply a matter of applying biblical principles, but we sometimes think it's experienced only by spiritual giants.

I have read *The Imitation of Christ* by fifteenth-century saint Thomas à Kempis; I have read about mystics who knelt and prayed for eight to ten hours and wore holes in the wood floors; I have read about Robert Murray McCheyne, who would soil the pages of his Bible and the wood of his pulpit with great floods of tears; and I have read *Power Through Prayer*, by E. M. Bounds, who spent hour after hour in prayer. As I did all that I often thought, "It's useless! I will never reach that level."

But God uses each of us in different ways.

Spiritual growth is not some mystical achievement for a select few on a higher spiritual plane. Rather, it is simply a matter of glorifying God by confessing Christ as Lord, aiming our lives at God's glory, confessing our sin, trusting God, bearing fruit, praising God, loving God, praying, proclaiming God's word, and witnessing to Christ.

Those are the keys you need to mature. When you focus on them, the Spirit of God will change you more and more into the image of Christ, and you will discover yourself growing spiritually. Amen.

Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is:

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

Sermons by Rev. Freddy Fritz

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PRAYER:

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

You have called us to glorify you in prayer. Help us to learn to pray in accordance with your will, so that you might glorify yourself.

You have also called us to proclaim your name. As we read and study your word, help us to proclaim the truths that are contained in your word.

And help each one of us bear witness to Jesus Christ. He is our Lord and Savior, and we want to witness to others about your amazing and saving grace in our lives.

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

CHARGE:

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