

Crosswalk: How To Live As Followers Of Jesus Christ

I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.
(Romans 12:1 ESV)

I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.
(Ephesians 4:1-3 ESV)

Grow

August 5th, 2018

2 Corinthians 3:18

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Introduction:

Good morning. Please turn with me in your Bibles to 2 Corinthians chapter 3.

We've spent a year reflecting on the gospel of Jesus Christ. How he taught us. How he loved us. How he died for us.

Now, we're spending some time thinking through our response. Very practically, how do we live when we've seen what we've seen in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ? Today we're going to see that a true understanding of the gospel should cause us to grow.

Growth is not optional for believers. If we've turned from our sin and trusted in Christ – if we are in fact Christians – then we WILL grow! In Luke 13 Jesus told this parable:

“A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard, and he came seeking fruit on it and found none. ⁷ And he said to the vinedresser, ‘Look, for three years now I have come seeking fruit on this fig tree, and I find none. Cut it down. Why should it use up the ground?’ ⁸ And he answered him, ‘Sir, let it alone this year also, until I dig around it and put on manure. ⁹ Then if it should bear fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.’” (Luke 13:6-9 ESV)

If someone brings you to a leafless, fruitless tree and tells you: “This is my award-winning apple tree”, you’re going to be a tad suspicious, right? Well, in the same way, Jesus tells us that it’s more than a tad suspicious when believers have no fruit in their lives – it’s suspicious when Christians live just like their neighbours do. Christians can’t be stagnant and fruitless: Living things grow!

But how?

Listen to what the Apostle Paul tells us in Romans 12:2. At this point in his letter, he has brilliantly explained the gospel. He’s told us all about the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and everything that it means for us but now he turns his attention to our response and he says:

Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect. (Romans 12:2 ESV)

Did you catch the command there? Paul says: “In view of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, here’s how you need to respond: **BE TRANSFORMED.**”

If you know much about grammar, then you’ll notice that Paul is giving us here a passive command. Let me put it to you this way: It’s one thing if I tell you to go outside and throw a baseball – that’s easy enough. That’s an active command. Just go and do it!

But it gets tricky if I tell you to go outside and *get hit* by a baseball. That’s a passive command. Now you’ve got to find someone to throw the ball – you need to get to the baseball diamond or the batting cage. Paul didn’t tell us to go out and actively transform ourselves. No, Paul told us to go out and BE TRANSFORMED. “Go out there and get hit with the baseball of growth” Paul says.

So, how do we go about doing that? How do we grow?

Look with me at 2 Corinthians 3:18. In this familiar verse, Paul explains what this transformation will look like and he explains how we can position ourselves to receive it. Hear now God’s word

to us:

And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit. (2 Corinthians 3:18 ESV)

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Now, let's wrestle through our question for this morning: How do we grow?

How Do We Grow?

Our text this morning answers this question in two ways. First, we grow:

1. As we behold

Paul says:

And we all, with unveiled face, **beholding the glory of the Lord**, are being transformed (2 Corinthians 3:18a ESV)

Now, if we want to properly understand Paul's argument here, then we need to make sure we understand the images he's alluding to. To do that, we'll need to flip back all the way to Exodus 34. That's the second book in the Bible. Let's read, beginning in verse 34:

³⁴ Whenever Moses went in before the LORD to speak with him, he would remove the veil, until he came out. And when he came out and told the people of Israel what he was commanded, ³⁵ the people of Israel would see the face of Moses, that the skin of Moses' face was shining. And Moses would put the veil over his face again, until he went in to speak with him. (Exodus 34:34–35 ESV)

Here's what Paul would have us see: Hearing from the Lord CHANGED Moses! Being in the presence of God and hearing His voice caused Moses to SHINE with glory! The people found that to be terribly frightening... They didn't have the same access to God that Moses had and so the glory of God was concealed from them with a veil.

But now, on this side of the cross, the way has been made for us to have personal access with God! You and I have access to God the Father that not even Moses enjoyed! That point was made abundantly clear during Jesus' crucifixion. Do you remember this important detail?

And Jesus uttered a loud cry and breathed his last. ³⁸ **And the curtain of the temple was torn in two**, from top to bottom. (Mark 15:37-38 ESV)

The curtain in the temple and the veil over Moses' face were symbols of the same thing: There used to be separation between God and man. But now, thanks be to God, Jesus has made a way for us to come home! Through Jesus we have access to the God who made us! We can worship Him – we talked about that in our first week of this series. We can pray to Him – we talked about that on week three. And we can hear from Him.

Now, on this side of the cross, we all with unveiled face are beholding the glory of the Lord! And just like Moses, we behold Him by hearing Him. Commentator Paul Barnett writes:

Paul's readers *see* the glory of Christ as they *hear* the gospel, which in turn gives the knowledge of God... As we behold, so we are transformed.¹

Did you catch that? If you want to behold the glory of the Lord then you need to listen to His Word. Hearing is seeing! So, we grow as we read the Bible and see the truth about who God is, and who we are, and how He has saved us in Christ. We grow as we SEE that and HEAR that in Holy Scripture. And as you behold Him, you will be changed. Thanks be to God!

The second thing we see in this text is that we grow:

2. Through the work of the Spirit

The text says:

And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. **For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.** (2 Corinthians 3:18 ESV)

¹ Paul Barnett, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, NICNT. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 206-207.

It is so vital that we understand this correctly. The growth that God is looking for in you is a growth that will not naturally come from you. The fruit that God desires in your life simply cannot be mustered up by human effort.

This is why Paul wrote:

Those who are in the flesh cannot please God. (Romans 8:8 ESV)

What does he mean by “in the flesh?” In Romans 8, Paul is making the point that we are not capable of obeying the law in our own strength. In fact, he refers to the Mosaic Law as:

the law of sin and death. (Romans 8:2b ESV)

The problem, of course, isn't the Law. Elsewhere we're told that the law is glorious! The problem is our inability to keep the law.

Do you know how there are always those signs at Canada's Wonderland that say: “You must be this tall to ride this rollercoaster”? Well, the law is like a sign that says: “You must be this righteous to enjoy the blessings and the inheritance of God.” The problem is, the bar is fifty feet in the air! The Pharisees saw that sign and arrogantly said: “I can do this!” But Paul tells us here that we're supposed to look at the Law and say: “I could never do this in my own strength! God is holy! I am not! Help me Jesus!”

And He does help us! Jesus has done for us what we could never do for ourselves! That's what Paul goes on to say in verses 3-4:

For **God has done** what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh,⁴ in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in **us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.** (Romans 8:3-4 ESV)

The requirement of the law has been fulfilled in those who walk “not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.” Meaning, Christians are people who don't place trust in their flesh – they

don't trust in their own strength, their own desires, or their own intellect. Christians are entirely dependent on the grace of God. If we are going to live the lives we were made to live, then we will need the Spirit of God to direct our thoughts, our desires and our actions every moment of every day.

That's how we grow. We grow as we behold the glory of the Lord and this is a work of the Spirit.

But, as we have said throughout this series, our goal is to get REALLY practical. So, let's put feet to this. Practically speaking, where should we position ourselves to get hit by the baseball of growth? How can you best position yourself to grow?

Application: How Can You Best Position Yourself to Grow?

We grow as we behold the glory of the Lord with the help of the Holy Spirit. Therefore, if we want to best position ourselves to grow, shouldn't we put ourselves in places where we are most likely to be helped by the Spirit to hear the Word? I think we can say first of all that if you want to grow, you should:

1. Gather under the preaching of the Word

Because the Bible seems to teach us that *hearing* is *seeing*. Paul Barnett said it so well that it's worth saying again:

Paul's readers *see* the glory of Christ as they *hear* the gospel, which in turn gives the knowledge of God... As we behold, so we are transformed.²

Do you want to position yourself to grow? Do you want to put your family in a place where they will grow? Here's an immediate point of application for us: Go to church! Teach your kids that soccer, baseball, fishing and camping are all wonderful things but that none of those things should ever take the place of corporate worship.

There are 168 hours in the week. Can't we block out 2 of those hours every Sunday to sit under

² Paul Barnett, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, NICNT. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 206-207.

the preaching of the Word, to sing and to pray with God's people? That's a two-hour investment in your soul and in the souls of your spouse and your kids. You're prepping your family to go out into a world full of temptations and trials – a world “with devils filled” as Martin Luther said it – so don't handicap yourself by neglecting the gathering of God's people. That's not just my opinion by the way. The author to the Hebrews wrote:

And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, ²⁵ **not neglecting to meet together**, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near. (Hebrews 10:24-25 ESV)

Very practically, little Timmy's coach is going to approach you and he's going to say: “There are 168 hours in the week, but we've decided to schedule Timmy's game at exactly the same time that you and your family would be worshiping and beholding the glory of the Lord. Is that going to be a problem?”

Okay, so he might not say it exactly like that, but that's *exactly* what's going on.

There will always be a million and one other things that you could be doing on Sunday morning.

But nothing else will contribute to your growth like a time of worship where the Word of God is read and pressed in to your life. Seek that, above everything else.

The early Christians had their priorities in order. Acts 2 tells us:

And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. (Acts 2:42 ESV)

And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, ⁴⁷ praising God and having favor with all the people. **And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.** (Acts 2:46-47 ESV)

Do you hear that? They devoted themselves to the gathering. They devoted themselves to beholding the glory of the Lord with the help of the Holy Spirit. And THEY GREW! Just like God said that they would. If you want to grow, gather under the preaching of the word.

Secondly, if we want to position ourselves to receive the gift of growth then we should:

2. Walk in obedience

If you want to see that in the text, look at James 1:25. There, he writes to the church:

But the one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer who forgets but a doer who acts, **he will be blessed in his doing.** (James 1:25 ESV)

Do you hear that? It turns out that there will be some folks out there who will only be hearers of the Word. They'll sit through the sermons – they might even read the Bible at home from time to time – but they won't actually DO what the Word says that they should do. Don't be that person.

On the flip side, James says, there will be some who are not only hearers but also DOERS of the Word. And this one: "will be blessed in his doing."

So, very practically, if you want to see growth in your Christian walk, BE A DOER! Read the Word of God and obey what it says. Put off your old way of living and put on obedience.

As you do that, God's word says that you will be blessed in your doing. As you put one foot in front of the other, you will feel God's help and provision pressing you forward like wind at your back. When you respond in obedience, it's as if you raise the mast on your ship and God breathes into your sails.

And pray! This growth comes from God so make sure that you are humbling yourself before Him every day. Ask God for the growth and then start walking. You will be blessed in that – you can count on it.

The third thing we should do if we want to position ourselves to receive the gift of growth is:

3. Pursue Christian friendship

The Apostle Paul warned:

Do not be deceived: “Bad company ruins good morals. (1 Corinthians 15:33 ESV)

One of the most frequent prayers that I pray for my children is that God will surround them with godly friends who will spur them on in their faith. I pray that for them because the book of Proverbs teaches:

Iron sharpens iron,
and one man sharpens another. (Proverbs 27:17 ESV)

If you're here today and you have a close, Christian friend, you can give an amen to that? Husbands and wives, do you want to see your spouse grow? Pray for a godly friend for your spouse and do everything you can to nurture those relationships. Parents, do you want your kids to grow? Get them to church, and to youth group, and to gym nights, and do your best to make sure that their inner circle of friends doesn't only consist of people from their hockey team.

This was part of the reasoning behind that warning we read in the book of Hebrews:

And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, ²⁵ not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but **encouraging one another**, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near. (Hebrews 10:24-25 ESV)

Don't stop meeting together because YOU NEED EACHOTHER! Iron sharpens iron and bad company ruins good morals. We need to be encouraged. Because life is hard. Some weeks we feel like we've taken two steps back. Some weeks we feel like we're going to give up. And, in those moments of weakness, God will use godly friends to pick us back up and to spur us on.

That being said, I want to issue a two-fold challenge this morning.

1. If you don't have a close, Christian friendship this morning, then make it your number one priority to establish one. Ask us how you can get plugged in. Take the initiative to get yourself out there. Join small groups. Stick around for lemonade on the lawn today. Come to that church

barbecue we announced. Invite people to your house. Make Christian friendship a priority in your life because the God who made you says you need it.

2. If you do have a close Christian friend, then praise God! That is a gift, and you should be thrilled about it! But, please keep your eyes open for people in the church who don't, and make space for them in your world. Invite them into your circle. Bring them over for dinner. Because there are a lot of lonely people in the church, and they need Christian friends who are walking in the same direction that they are trying to walk in. Be that friend.

As we conclude, the Bible says that there is one other place where we are uniquely positioned to grow, but it is not a place where any of us desire to be. We've been talking about how we can position ourselves for growth, but every once in a while, for reasons that are beyond our understanding, God puts us in a place where growth is the only option. So, as we conclude, if we want to be best positioned to grow then we should:

4. **Submit to suffering**

Let me be very careful here. I'm not suggesting that we should pursue suffering, as if it is something that is to be desired. What I am saying is that there is no other place where growth comes more rapidly than in the midst of suffering.

C.S. Lewis famously wrote:

We can ignore even pleasure. But pain insists upon being attended to. God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pains: it is his megaphone to rouse a deaf world.³

That quote has stood the test of time because it's really just a paraphrase of what we read in God's word. James wrote:

³ C.S. Lewis. *The Problem of Pain*.

Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds,³ for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness.⁴ And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing. (James 1:2-4 ESV)

James says here that God uses suffering and hardships to perfect our faith. Have you ever noticed that trials tend to deepen our prayer life? The book of Job is perhaps the deepest look we have into the purpose of pain and suffering and it's there that we read:

He delivers the afflicted **by** their affliction
and opens their ear **by** adversity. (Job 36:15 ESV)

Look closely at this verse. Do you notice that the text doesn't say: "He delivers them **from** their affliction"? No, the text says something far more challenging. Here we find that trials and hardship, rather than being the things which God is concerned to deliver us from, are actually things which God is using to shape and mold us. He is saving us *with* trials!

That's hard to hear. Let me say this carefully: I don't want to trivialize or minimize your pain. I'm not saying that we should be gluttons for hardship.

Suffering is awful.

And, the Bible says, it's the place where you will grow like you have never grown before. You will learn more in the school of affliction than you will anywhere else.

Suffering brings perspective. It reminds us that these bodies are wasting away. It reminds us that all of the earthly idols that we're so inclined to pursue offer us nothing of lasting value. It is the most effective means of causing us to let go of a world that is passing away – a world that we so frequently find ourselves holding onto with white knuckles.

Very practically, I want to leave you with one challenge here:

1. Ask God for the strength to submit to suffering.

Now, for some of you, perhaps there are no dark clouds on the horizon. Praise God for that! Even

still, use this season of your life to grow your faith so that you'll be able to stand when the storm comes. Because the storms will come. Ask God to give you the strength to submit to suffering.

But for others of you, you're already there. You're living in the storm. To you I'd say, even as you're asking God to take this affliction from you, in the same breath ask Him to teach you and shape you. Pray every day that your suffering won't be wasted, and that God will use this season to transform your heart and mind. Ask Him to remind you that He is still on His throne, and that He is still working all things for your eternal good, and that these temporary hardships are preparing for you an eternal glory. Because that's what He tells us in His word:

For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, (2 Corinthians 4:17 ESV)

We are Christians. We are followers of Jesus Christ – the same Christ whose path to glory led him through the cross of Calvary. It looked for all the world like meaningless suffering, but God was working triumph through that tragedy. He will do the same with yours.

As we behold the glory of the Lord, we grow. We grow as we sit together under the preaching of the word. We grow as we prayerfully walk in obedience. We grow as we invest in godly friendships. And we grow as we submit to suffering. Growth is not always easy, but it is always good. It prepares us to be effective in furthering God's kingdom here on earth. It turns our attention away from the things that are perishing to the things that will endure forever.

This is the life we are called to. This is the road to growth and maturity. And this is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Let's pray.