

## The Problem: Slow Growth

One of the most frequent problems that any new convert encounters—and with which older believers still struggle—is a lack of spiritual growth. It seems ever so slow, or often simply fails to appear. There are buds on the fig tree, little figs are apparent, but many never mature and eventually drop from the branches. “Why is my fruit so skimpy and few in number, when that of others is luscious and abundant?” This question, framed in a dozen different ways, is all too frequent.

It is obvious that once God has given a person new life that enables him to believe in Jesus Christ as the One who died for his sins, (Eph. 2:5) that new life doesn’t die—it continues, as does the ability to please Christ throughout the rest of the person’s life, right into eternity. He is a new creation (2 Cor. 5:17); everything takes on a new aspect, has new meaning, and ought to produce true growth. But so often growth is stunted. “What is behind this? How can I change so as to produce fruit worthy of offering to God?”

For starters, it’s important to recognize that the forgiveness of sins and one’s eternal salvation is not only an end, but also a beginning. Being justified by faith means that the believer can look forward to the future with assurance that he need no longer fear judgment because Jesus has paid the penalty for his sins. But if fear has ended, what has begun? Where

is the joy of obedient productivity that, according to John 15:5, ought to replace it? That's the heart of the problem—progress is so slow that many a believer begins to wonder whether or not his faith is real. After all, there ought to be “much fruit,” but the pieces he picks are so small and few in number that he may wonder whether even these are a sign of true spiritual growth. He knows that when the fruit is bad, so is its tree (Matt. 12:33). Something is wrong with him; indeed, he may wonder, “Am I a genuine Christian?”

Do you have this problem—to a lesser or greater extent? Many do.

In what areas of your life is there little fruit (or slow growth)?

---

---

---

What within is the problem? Lack of resolve? Confusion? Inability? Want of knowledge? Or are you not truly a Christian? After all, faith without works is dead. There is one other possibility that you probably haven't considered—one that could very likely be the root of your problem. It is so important a factor that unless you understand it and put it into practice regularly, it will continue to hinder the growth that you are seeking. In this booklet, I will consider this major element of growth in such a manner that you will be able to recognize it as the heart of your difficulty if that, in fact, is your problem. And we will explain God's solution to it.

The end, as I noted, is also a beginning. But new elements that are connected with the process of sanctification must be considered in order to ensure growth. The teaching in Chris-

tian circles today tends to offer one of two basic options:<sup>1</sup> (1) inaction on your part in lieu of contemplation and prayer;<sup>2</sup> or (2) obedience to biblical commands that leads to growth.

Have you approached your sanctification in either of these two ways? If so, which one?

- I tend toward inactivity in lieu of contemplation and prayer, believing that sanctification is an act of God that requires little or no effort on my part.
- I tend toward mechanically obeying the Bible, believing that sanctification is dependent on my efforts.

While the two options are often set in opposition to each other, it is incorrect to view matters that way. Aspects of both must be combined in order to take in the full scope of biblical teaching. It is surely not impossible to consider one's ways, pray about them, and then do what God's Word directs. Moreover, there must be a way to deal with flaws that persistently hold back growth of the luscious fruit of the Spirit that you so earnestly desire. Indeed, it is when one of these two options is missing, out of either neglect or poor decision-making, that you can expect failure. Those who insist on the first option alone incorrectly expect God to do for them what he has bidden them to do. Those who urge the second at the expense of the first fail to lean on God in faith and prayer, instead depending entirely on themselves. They, too, can expect to fail. The old problem of discovering the proper relation of the human to the divine is in play when making such bad choices.

1. These two options take various forms in different overall systems of theology.

2. This option was historically known as *quietism*.

Neither option should be opposed to the other, as I said; nor should emphasis on one override the other. Spiritual growth doesn't come from inaction, nor does it come from attempting to obey God in your own wisdom and strength. Both human and divine activity must accompany each other. Note, for instance, Philippians 2:13: "It is God Who is producing in you both the willingness and the ability to do the things that please Him."<sup>3</sup> In that cogent statement, Paul joins both the human and the divine in a cooperative effort: *you* do what *God* directs and enables you to do. The next question is: "How do I do it? How does this joint effort actually take place in everyday life? What is my part?" I will consider this matter shortly, but first, another factor must be mentioned.

This second thing to note is that, in plant life or in Christian living, growth is gradual. Fruit does not suddenly appear fully grown on the tree. *Patience* is required of the gardener and of the believer. During the period of growth, prayer and cultivation are required. Both of these elements must be continual. Intermittent attention on your part can seriously interfere with your objective. Indeed, the fact that disciplined, God-dependent effort is required cannot be stressed too strongly.

### **The Solution: Radical Amputation (Matthew 18:8–9)**

What is necessary for this gradual production of good fruit, approved by God upon inspection? Both a positive factor and a negative factor are involved. This booklet is devoted

3. Scripture quotations in this booklet are from Jay Adams, trans., *The Christian Counselor's New Testament and Proverbs* (Stanley, NC: Timeless Texts, 2000).

to understanding the latter. Although I will mention the former—it would be wrong not to do so—the emphasis will be placed on the negative aspects of the process of growth. As Peter put it, the way to grow is “by grace” (2 Peter 3:18).<sup>4</sup> God’s gracious help enables us to learn more about Jesus and his ways so that we may readily follow them. But learning takes time and effort, and always involves the humility to recognize and admit the ignorance that leads one to seek truth. To find the opportunity necessary to study ordinarily involves the use of time that can be acquired only by letting go of less essential interests.

So what is the negative factor that is necessary for growth by grace? It is what I call *radical amputation*. Most likely, the term is new to you. But it is simply a way to describe and recall the teaching of Jesus found in Matthew 5:29–30: “So if your right eye causes you to stumble, tear it out and throw it away from you; it is to your advantage to have one of your members perish, than for your whole body to be thrown into Gehenna. And if your right hand causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it away from you.”<sup>5</sup>

As I noted above, there are two sides to this dynamic. Not only must one leave behind his old, sinful ways, but he must replace them with new, righteous ones. This twofold process of change is what leads to Christian growth. The process can also be referred to as the *put off/put on* dynamic, since the Scriptures so frequently use these two terms to describe it (e.g., Col. 3:5–10).

4. The translation “in grace,” as though one grows by finding himself in a sphere of grace, is misleading. What Peter had in mind was that it takes grace to produce spiritual growth. This grace involves a knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. In Greek, *en* is regularly translated “by” as well as “in.”

5. Jesus uses the same illustration in a different context and application in Matthew 18:7–9, where he also includes the foot.