

The Power to Change

Philippians 1:3-6, Philippians 1:9-10, Philippians 2:12-13, Proverbs 6:10-11

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This morning, we're looking at another power which the Holy Spirit gives us... the power to change, mature, and bear fruit.

The Christian life isn't just a matter of getting saved, then serving, sacrificing and suffering until Jesus returns. We're not just marking time, doing our best to be good Christians until He returns.

The Christian life is, or at least it should be, a life of joy and fulfillment. Much of that joy and fulfillment flows from the transformation that God's bringing about in us through His Spirit.

The more God changes us to be like Christ, the more we're able to know Him and to experience His love for us.

Philippians 1:3-6, 9-11, "I thank my God every time I remember you. In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now, being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus. And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ—to the glory and praise of God."

Of what is Paul so confident? He's confident that the good work, which had begun in them, would continue until it's fully and finally brought to completion on the day Christ returns.

This tells us that spiritual growth is an ongoing process. A growth that begins when we first place our trust in Christ, and which continues throughout our lives.

It's also a progressive process; note that Paul prays in verse 9 that their love would "*abound more and more.*" In other words, that their love would continually increase.

God doesn't intend that we be spiritually static. God intends that we grow and change. That's Paul's prayer. By the way, did you see a mention in any of these verses of an age limit?

In other words, this process of becoming like Christ doesn't plateau when we turn fifty, sixty, seventy, or eighty.

We never retire from growing in faith. This is a lifelong process and as long as we're alive, we're to be changing.

2 Corinthians 4:16, "*Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day.*"

Now, I'm doing what I can to slow down the "*wasting away*" of my outward body. But the point Paul's making is that the deterioration of our flesh does not imply a corresponding spiritual decline.

Someone might assume that, along with losing some physical strength and perhaps even some mental sharpness, we would also suffer a loss of spiritual strength and power.

But Paul tells us that the opposite is true. Even as the strength of our external body diminishes, our spirit continues to be renewed, daily.

That is why the process of spiritual transformation, becoming like Christ, doesn't stop or even slow down as we grow older.

God is continually renewing us spiritually; even those of us who are on Medicare.

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Now, Philippians 1:6 tells us that God is the one who began this process of transformation, and that He will bring it to completion.

Philippians 1:6b, *“he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.”*

Does that mean it is automatic? Is it something that just happens, no matter what we do? Should we just *“let go and let God?”* No.

Spiritual growth requires intentional effort on our part. Yes, the power is all from God, but we must cooperate with God.

Listen to what Paul tells us a little later in Philippians 2:12-13, *“Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed—not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence—continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose.”*

This is a key verse in understanding how the process of spiritual growth and maturity works in our lives. It highlights both our part and God’s part.

When Paul tells them to *“work out”* their salvation in verse 12, you need to understand that he isn’t saying that they’re to earn salvation.

To understand what he’s saying, we need to realize that *“salvation”* has several components, a beginning, a middle, and an end.

The beginning of salvation is *“justification.”* This is a one-time event which takes place when we first trust in Christ.

It's a legal declaration by God that we're no longer guilty of sin, but that the guilt of our sin has been transferred to Christ, while the credit of His righteousness has been transferred to us.

We have no part in our justification, other than to receive it by faith. It's a unilateral act by God.

Following justification is "sanctification," which is the lifelong process of being changed into the likeness of Christ. This requires us to cooperate with the Holy Spirit's work in us.

Finally, there's "glorification," when Christ returns and we're fully and completely changed.

In 1 Corinthians 15:52, Paul writes that it will happen "*in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet.*" This is something that God does, without any action on our part.

In other words, salvation is an initial event, followed by a process, followed by a final event.

So, when Paul tells the Philippians that they must "*work out*" their salvation, he's referring to sanctification, that middle part of salvation.

Let's read Philippians 2:12-13, again: "*Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed—not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence—continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose.*"

This is a key verse because it highlights both our part and God's part in sanctification. We must do something, but we're able to do our part only because it's God Who's working in us through His Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit is the one who's strengthening our will to live holy lives. He's the one who's enabling us to carry out our holy intentions in ways that fulfill His purposes. Do you see the partnership here?

We work together with the Holy Spirit. We cooperate with the Holy Spirit in this process of spiritual transformation. God provides the power, but we must use that power to act.

I want to pause here and make an important point. This process of spiritual growth, this process of becoming more like Christ—in our desires, values, thinking, speech and actions doesn't affect our standing with God.

We're loved by God, completely and unconditionally. We're accepted by God, completely and unconditionally, from the very beginning of our walk with Christ, and every day after that, because we're in Christ.

The basis of God's love and acceptance of us isn't our work, it's the work of Christ on the cross.

But our growth in faith and obedience does change our experience of that relationship. The more God changes us to be like Christ, the more we're able to comprehend His love for us.

The changes that God makes in our lives, through the process of sanctification, provides confirmation that the initial event, justification by faith, has actually taken place, but our spiritual growth still matters.

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Therefore, we must do something in order to grow spiritually. So, what is it that we must do? Let me give you an illustration.

A few months ago, the news was filled with images of the Winter Olympics. You may have watched the Luge, Curling, Figure Skating or Hockey matches.

These events are all very different. Some of them can be dangerous, as we saw when Lindsay Vonn crashed in her skiing event.

Most were pretty safe like curling, unless you were accused of cheating or sprained an ankle.

Some of the athletic disciplines require precision, while others require strength, endurance, or a complete lack of concern for personal safety.

But what they all have in common is that they require many years, and thousands of hours, of practice.

Thousands of reps at the gym. Thousands of miles of cross-country skiing. Thousands of hours repeating skating drills, or sweeping in front of the curling stone.

But here's the key point: during those years, and those thousands of hours of training, there wasn't any one day, or week, or month that made the difference, that made them into an Olympic athlete.

It was the slow, steady, accumulation of skill and strength over time, little by little, day by day, that made them into what they are.

The same is true for someone who develops skill or mastery in any discipline, whether it's learning to play the piano, speak a foreign language, restore classic cars, or build custom cabinets.

Change and growth don't happen overnight. It happens gradually, little by little, as we try and fail, and try again, then succeed. It's the discipline of doing a little bit, over and over, every day, that results in amazing progress over time.

The same is true of spiritual growth. The same is true of the changes that God makes in us, with our cooperation. It's the commitment to daily spiritual discipline that makes a huge difference over time.

It's like praying once a day, "*Father, please bless our church.*" That's something each one of us can do. If we commit to doing that, it'll have a tremendous impact.

As each of our individual, brief prayers are repeated every day, they combine to produce a chorus of prayers to God.

The important thing is to pray every day, even if it's just one five-word prayer. Then build on that as you're able. It's the same with reading the Bible. What was my command last week? "Read the Bible... today."

Not, "Read a chapter of the Bible every day." Not, "Read through the Bible in a year." Not even, "Learn Hebrew and Greek so that you can study the Bible in the original languages."

No, just read the Bible today, and every day, even if it's only a paragraph or a single verse.

What matters is repetition; getting in the "reps," as weightlifters would say. That daily repetition of disciplining yourself to read the Bible, even for only a few minutes, will pay huge dividends over time.

If you'll do that consistently, you'll see results. Some of you can testify to the benefits of daily prayer and daily Bible reading because you've been doing it for years.

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But it's not just so-called "religious" activities that matter to our spiritual growth. Any kind of spiritual change we need to make can use the same approach.

For example, let's take the way we communicate. The Bible says this is a critical area of Christian character.

James 1:26, *“Those who consider themselves religious and yet do not keep a tight rein on their tongues deceive themselves, and their religion is worthless.”*

If we don't keep a tight rein on our tongues, James says that our religion is *“worthless.”* Think about that. Our speech literally has the power to bring death or life. This is important.

If God should convict you that you need to get better control of your speech, what would you do? If your words are too negative and judgmental, what do you do?

Well, what you shouldn't do is take an oath that from this day forward, you'll never utter another critical word. That'll almost certainly fail since bad habits get stronger over time, just like good ones.

Bad habits must be unlearned in the same way, little by little over time. A better approach would be to say, *“God, please help me to say one encouraging thing to someone every day.”* That's all.

One positive, encouraging thing each day. It doesn't seem like much. But over time, it'll bring about a massive change in how you use your tongue. It'll cause you to be mindful of what you're saying.

It'll make you sensitive to how your words affect others. And if you think that a few words of encouragement won't make a difference, listen to the wisdom of Proverbs.

Proverbs 16:24, *“Gracious words are a honeycomb, sweet to the soul and healing to the bones.”*

We underestimate the constructive power of genuine, authentic words of praise and affirmation. Their healing and nourishing effects penetrate into the deepest part of us, right down to the bone.

Mark Twain once wrote in a letter, *“I can live two weeks on a good compliment with nothing else to eat.”*

He was probably underestimating the lasting effects of positive words, but Mr. Clemens was only re-stating what Proverbs told us thirty centuries ago.

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When you get control of your tongue, suppose God convicts you of your need to share your faith. This is something we should all be able and ready to do.

Every day, we cross paths with people whose deepest need is to know Jesus Christ as Savior. Love should compel us to share the Good News with them.

Colossians 4:3-6, *“And pray for us, too, that God may open a door for our message, so that we may proclaim the mystery of Christ, for which I am in chains. Pray that I may proclaim it clearly, as I should. Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders; make the most of every opportunity. Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone.”*

Paul’s asking them to pray that God would open doors for him to share the gospel. He was asking for prayer that he could do this clearly.

He also was urging them to *“make the most of every opportunity.”* This means they should always be on the lookout for opportunities to talk to people about Christ.

By the way, if your reason for not sharing the Gospel is that you think you don’t have any opportunities, think again. You probably have more opportunities than you realize.

Following the principle of *“little by little, day by day,”* pray daily that someone would take the initiative to ask if you’re a Christian, or to ask why you’re different. Ask God that openings to talk about Christ would just fall in your lap.

Then, over time, there are other things you can do like learn the Romans Road to Salvation or write out your testimony.

If you do that and then respond to the risk-free opportunities that God brings your way, I predict that in a short time, you’ll find yourself sharing the gospel with confidence.

But this principle of *“little by little, day by day”* can also work in the other direction. If spiritual habits decline or if sinful habits increase, then this same principle gradually leads to becoming distant from God.

It leads to a lack of interest in the things of God, a lack of taste for spiritual things. Ultimately, if the decline continues, it can lead to someone walking away from the practice of their faith altogether.

It’s important to maintain what you might call *“spiritual hygiene.”* *“Spiritual hygiene”* means to continue the regular practice of spiritual habits like daily prayer, daily Bible reading, and regular Christian fellowship in order for your faith to stay strong.

Usually it isn’t one big issue that causes decay or decline. It’s a host of little issues, left unaddressed, that accumulate over time.

We need to be watchful, alert and take care of the little things. We need to do our spiritual maintenance and take care of our spiritual hygiene.

In the ancient world, there was a famous athlete, named Milo of Croton. A real person. He lived in Greece in the 6th century B.C., and was celebrated for his amazing strength.

He won multiple victories wrestling in the Olympic games and in other competitions. Supposedly, he would display his strength by carrying a full-grown bull on his shoulders around the Olympic stadium.

The story of how he developed his great strength was this: he took a newborn calf and lifted it onto his shoulders. Then every day, he lifted the calf again.

As the calf gradually grew larger and heavier, Milo's muscles adapted, little by little to the calf's increased size and weight, until eventually, he could lift a full-grown bull.

Now, that story may be embellished as I always wondered how he got a full-grown bull to cooperate. Regardless, the principle is sound. Daily repetition will eventually result in a huge gain.

In the church at Corinth, there were some divisions in the fellowship. They had an "Apollos" faction and a "Pauline" faction.

It seems like a great problem to have... to choose to be taught by Apollos or Paul? Here's Paul's response:

1 Corinthians 3:5-9, "What, after all, is Apollos? And what is Paul? Only servants, through whom you came to believe—as the Lord has assigned to each his task. I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God has been making it grow. So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow. The one who plants and the one who waters have one purpose, and they will each be rewarded according to their own labor. For we are co-workers in God's service; you are God's field, God's building."

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Conclusion

What I'd like you to get from this passage today is the analogy that Paul uses, which is that the church is God's field, and God is the One who causes the growth.

Apollos and Paul are just two workers, one who plants the seed and one who waters the seed.

Have you ever planted a garden? Do you do all the work in one long, intense day and then the plants shoot up immediately? No, of course not.

First, you prepare the soil. Then you plant the seeds and cover them up so the birds won't eat them. Later, you may add fertilizer.

Every few days or so, you water. If weeds start to appear, you pull them up. After a few weeks, the green shoots appear, and finally the crop.

The point is that growth happens slowly, over time; it doesn't happen automatically. You must tend the garden. You must hoe, plant, fertilize, water and pull weeds.

You must do a little work every day. Eventually, you get to reap the fruit of your labors. A garden full of beautiful, delicious vegetables.

God's the one who made the plants grow. But you had to act, too, so the plants would get the food and water they needed and keep the bugs and weeds out.

You can think of your spiritual life like that, as a garden. God's causing the growth.

You'll see a harvest of righteousness, faith, and hope; a harvest of love, joy, and peace in your life, by maintaining good spiritual habits, little by little, day by day.

Grace Fellowship is God's garden. If we each do our own individual part, whatever it may be; to plant, to water, or to weed little by little, day by day, then over time we'll see a wonderful harvest of health and vigor. God will bring the growth.