

Growing Your Faith

By Jerry Bridges¹

An Overview

Preface – Christians who aren't growing have two issues: they don't know how to grow, and they don't know they ought to grow.

Section 1 – *The Necessity for Spiritual Growth*

Chapter 1 – The Foundation for Growth – Growth is a normal expression of life. If a living thing isn't growing, we know there's something wrong. That's why the bible urges us to grow. "Grow in the grace and in knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ." 2Pet. 3:18

- We grow "more and more." – that is, we grow incrementally.
- We grow intentionally, not passively.
- We grow appropriately, using the God-given ways of growth in the Bible.
- We grow when we correctly understand God's grace, and consistently appropriate it.

Grace "teaches us to say 'No' to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives (Tit. 2:12) – it is not an indulgent grace that ignores our sin. And yet,

- God's approval was earned for us by Christ in his sinless life and sin-bearing death. It cannot be earned by us; but what he earned is considered our own.
- Grace is God's favor *through Christ* to people who deserve his *disfavor*.
- God's favor is not just a favorable disposition toward us, but God's action toward us for our good: to save us, give us strength, sustain us, and equip us for ministry.
- Just as you can do nothing to earn your salvation, so you can do nothing to earn God's favor in your daily life.

If you do not grasp this truth, the spiritual disciplines that are intended to help you grow will become burdensome duties you think you must practice in order to maintain God's favor.

Bookends: there are two bookends that hold together the means by which we grow.

The **first** is *the righteousness of Christ* - We trust in the righteousness of Christ for our salvation, not in anything we do ourselves. That's faith. When we trust in *or depend on* Christ as our savior, God justifies us by declaring us righteous on the basis that He has charged our sins to Christ, and credited Christ's righteousness to us. It is not only a past event, but a present reality.

The **second** is *the power of Christ* – Our power to live the Christian life must come from Christ. We have no ability in ourselves to grow. All the ability comes from him. We are new creations in Christ, but the power is still outside of us. It resides in Christ, and it is applied to our hearts by the Holy Spirit *as we depend on him*.

Dependence is the common element in both bookends. We must look outside ourselves for the power to grow spiritually. This is what it means to live by grace.

¹ Bridges, Gerald D., *Growing Your Faith* (NavPress, Colorado Springs 2004)

Chapter 2 – Compelled by Love

- Nothing you ever do will cause God to love you any more or any less. He loves you strictly by his grace given to you through Jesus Christ.
- The grace of salvation is the same grace by which we live the Christian life. We are not saved by grace and blessed by works.
- Rather than add works to grace, we are to be so gripped by the magnificence and boundless generosity of God's grace that we respond out of gratitude rather than out of a sense of duty.
- Christian growth is not a matter of "oughts" – we are free from having to earn God's blessings by our obedience or practice of spiritual disciplines.

Why is all this true? Because God is more concerned with our *motivation* for commitment, discipline, and obedience than our *performance*. Such a God-ward motivation is not merely an inclination or feeling. We are not to wait until we "feel like" having a quiet time, or being obedient to God's commands. Motive is the *reason* we do something, not the emotion.

For Christ's love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again (2Cor. 5:14-15).

We are to make his will the rule of our lives, and his glory the goal for which we live. This is what spiritual growth is all about. As Paul reflected on this infinite love manifested in Christ's death, he was compelled to live for the One who died for him and rose again.

Jerry confesses, "I know I have as wicked a sinful nature as anyone else, and apart from the influence of the Holy Spirit in my life, I am fully capable of the so-called gross sins of immorality, drunkenness, stealing, and the like. But those are not the sins which trouble me at this time. Rather, I struggle with what I call 'refined' sins: selfishness, pride, impatience, a critical attitude, and a judgmental spirit... They are sins that, apart from the atoning death of Christ for me, would send me to eternal hell... I was compelled by his love to seek to put away those sins... by his Spirit."

Reverence for God – it is not only out of gratitude that we seek to grow in obedience, but out of reverence for God. [*You've heard me say that when we truly know we are God's children, and his ambassadors in this world, we choose to behave accordingly. Our identity in Christ compels us. Our heartfelt desire, once we realize who we are through Christ, is to bring God glory and honor.*] Jerry brings up the example of Joseph, who would not sin with Potiphar's wife: "How then could I do such a wicked thing and sin against God?" He revered God too much to do that. Paul says, "Let us ... perfect holiness out of reverence for God" (2Cor. 7:1). Reverence is recognizing "God's intrinsic worthiness, the infinite majesty of his being, and the infinite perfection of his character. Because of who he is and what he is, God is infinitely worthy of my most diligent and loving obedience, even if I never receive a single blessing from him." [*Yet indeed we are blessed, which drives us to our knees in bewilderment, wonder, and awe of God's grace.*]

Growing in Grace: to continually grow in our understanding of God's grace; to become progressively more aware of our own continued spiritual bankruptcy and the unmerited, unearned, and undeserved favor of God. *Great definition!*

Section 2 – *The Means of Spiritual Growth*

Chapter 3 – Disciplined by Grace

This is a rather long chapter in which Jerry reminds us that the disciplines are not an end in themselves. Nor are we to feel like we're rewarded if we do them, and punished if we don't. They must be driven by grace alone, and not by the law. If we understand grace properly, we will be obedient: **the same grace that brings salvation to us also disciplines us as believers.**

Titus 2:11-12 For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men. It teaches us to say "No" to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age... NIV

The word used for "teaches" is the Greek *paideuo* (pahee-dyoo'-o). It comes from the word for training up a child, i.e. to educate, or by implication, to discipline by punishment, admonition, and reproof. All of these are administered in love, and for the benefit of the child. It was used in Eph. 6:4 as Paul charged fathers to bring up their children in the training (i.e. discipline) and instruction of the Lord. "*Discipline includes all instruction, all reproof and correction, and all providentially directed circumstances in our lives that are aimed at cultivating spiritual growth and godly character.*"

Because we're performance-oriented by nature, it's easy to think of the spiritual disciplines (quiet time, Bible-study, prayer, etc.) as legal requirements, rather than products of grace. That's why we need to keep in mind the bookends of grace: Christ's righteousness, and Christ's power.

- All our responses to God's dealings with us, and all our practice of the spiritual disciplines must be based on the knowledge that God is dealing with us in grace.
- All our effort to teach godly living and spiritual maturity to others must be grounded in grace.

Salvation and Discipline are Inseparable

God never saves people and leaves them alone to continue in their immaturity and sinful lifestyle. Those whom he saves, he disciplines. Our spiritual growth is not left to our initiative, nor is it dependent upon our wisdom to know in which areas and in which direction we need to grow. Rather, it is God himself who initiates and superintends our spiritual growth. This is not to say that we have no responsibility to respond to God's spiritual child-training in our lives, but it is to say that he is the one in charge of our training.

God uses others such as pastors and mature Christians as his agents, and he will use means such as his word and circumstances to discipline us. But he takes the ultimate responsibility. If we are not growing, if there is no difference in our lives before and after salvation, then it is cause for concern. If we are not disciplined, then we are not legitimate children (Heb. 12:8). We are to examine and test ourselves to see if we are actually in the faith (2Cor. 13:5), and have not made an empty profession. Our profession alone will not save us. Therefore we must be eager to make our calling and election sure (2Pet. 1:10). There ought to be evidence of our faith. But the evidence alone, i.e. our obedience, does not save us either. Only faith can save. But if our faith is

saving faith, there will always be evidence. As Luther said, “We are saved by faith alone, but the faith that saves is never alone.” What, then, is saving faith? Jerry offers a brief definition:

- Trusting in Christ alone as our savior without adding any of our own goodness
- Dying to the reign of sin in our lives through union with Jesus Christ
- Seeing the grace of God at work in us to discipline and train us so that we grow

“God’s discipline in our lives and the desire to grow on our part, be it ever so faint, is the inevitable result of receiving God’s gift of salvation by faith.”

Grace Teaches Us to Say No

Grace evidences itself in both positive and negative ways. We not only do what is right, but we stop doing what is wrong. Grace first teaches us to say no to ungodliness and worldly passions. In its broadest sense, ungodliness means disregarding God, ignoring him, or not taking him into account in our life. A person can be highly moral, even benevolent, and still be ungodly.² Grace teaches us to renounce this ungodly attitude.

Grace also teaches us to say no to worldly passions. We are not to have an inordinate desire for and preoccupation with the things of this life: possessions, prestige, pleasure, and power. They are not to drive and motivate us.

We died to the dominion of sin in our lives, and therefore we put to death the misdeeds of the body (Rom. 8:13). We are to abstain from sinful desires which war against our soul (1Pet. 2:11).

Grace Teaches Us To Say Yes

Indwelling sin that remains in us has a persistent inclination toward worldly passions and needs the constant restraint of being denied its gratification. But we cannot leave a vacuum by simply stopping what is bad. We must replace it with what is good. And so we have put off the old self, and now we put on the new self (Eph. 4:22-24; Col. 3:9-10). Jerry says this is like using a pair of scissors. One blade cannot shear by itself. Both blades must be joined at the pivot and work in conjunction with each other to be effective.

Grace teaches us “to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in this present age” (Tit. 2:12). This refers to actions regarding ourselves, others, and God. We are to exercise restraint and practice goodness. We are to treat others as we would have them treat us (Matt. 7:12). And we are to consider God’s glory and his will in every aspect of our lives, doing everything out of reverence and love for him. We are not to give opportunity for God’s name to be blasphemed among the heathen (Rom. 2:24; Tit. 2:5,8), thus preserving the integrity and reputation of the church. This cannot be done by sheer grit and willpower. We lack the ability on our own to be obedient. It is by grace, not the guilt and burden of the law, that we are disciplined. We must learn to depend on Christ daily for our acceptance and our power.

² Jesus was asked by a rich young man what he must do to be saved. He said that he had obeyed the 2nd tablet of the Ten Commandments since he was a child (how he treats others). And so Jesus tests him concerning his relationship with God (1st four commandments). He tells the young man to sell all he owns and follow him. The young man went away dejected, for he was very rich – that is, the young man was moral, but owned by his possessions and worldly passions. He had not taken God into account in his life (Matt. 10:17-22).

Chapter 4 – The Role of the Holy Spirit

Jerry begins this chapter by distinguishing the *monergistic* (meaning one-sided) and *synergistic* (meaning cooperative) progress of our spiritual growth. When we look at the source of the power needed to grow, and at our ability to grow, our progress must be driven by the Spirit alone. The power and ability either come from the Spirit or they don't come at all. When we look at the motivation and the activities that are involved in our growth, the progress appears to be one-sided again, this time on our part. We are commanded to grow, and what areas to grow in, as if it was up to us. But because the power and ability must come from the Spirit, it is actually a cooperative venture.

As far as we are concerned, we are completely responsible for choosing to grow, and doing what is necessary to ensure that we are growing. But because the Spirit is the guarantor of our inheritance in the kingdom (Eph. 1:14), he is responsible to ensure that our sanctification will continue to completion (Jms. 1:4). He brings to bear everything necessary for our successful growth. Therefore, God is completely sovereign to ensure that we grow; and we are completely responsible to ensure that we grow. Both are true at the same time.

2 Cor 3:17-18 Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, ***are being transformed*** into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit. NIV

The Bible is very clear that we are “*being transformed*” – passive tense. It is not our own willful activity that transforms us, but the activity of the Spirit. “And I will put my Spirit in you and ***move you*** to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws” (Ezek. 36:27). We are being sanctified and transformed by the activities of the Holy Spirit. We are being freed more and more from our sinful traits, and in their place Christlike virtue is being developed in us (Rom. 6:18). “Though sanctification is the work of the Holy Spirit in us, it does involve our wholehearted response in obedience, and the regular use of the spiritual disciplines that are *instruments of sanctification*” (they are not the *means* of our sanctification).

Regeneration

Prior to our conversion, the Holy Spirit begins a process in us called regeneration. He begins to turn our heart of stone to flesh. He circumcises our ears so that we may hear, and he restores our sight so that we may see the kingdom. He gives us desire and understanding so that when the gospel is presented, its seed falls on fertile soil. At our conversion we are reborn, which the bible describes as “the washing of rebirth [cleansing of the old self] and renewal by the Holy Spirit [giving of the new self]” (Tit. 3:5) Jerry tells us that regeneration, in its non-theological sense, takes place after conversion (i.e. after faith and repentance).³ We have new life; we are new creations; we have capabilities and capacities that we did not have before. “We can never be the same again... Regeneration is a monergistic work of the Holy Spirit, just as justification is.”

³ The reformed view is that regeneration necessarily takes place prior to conversion as the Holy Spirit enables the elect to respond to the gospel. The Arminian view is that regeneration takes place after conversion, because Christ's sacrifice already enabled everyone to respond to the gospel. Jerry holds to the reformed view, but here he merely describes our new life using the word “regenerate” to convey the idea of new birth.

Sanctification

Sanctification means cleansing or setting apart for God’s use. It conveys the same idea as “holiness.” After our conversion, the process of sanctification begins. It is “the carrying out of regeneration to its intended end.” William Plumer writes, “Regeneration is an *act* of God’s Spirit. Sanctification is a *work* of God’s Spirit.” He means that sanctification is a consequence of the act of regeneration, and it is a process rather than an event. Regeneration makes us newborns, but sanctification makes us mature. Jerry asks an important question: “Can a person be justified but not sanctified?” The answer is no. If we have been justified by an act of Christ on the cross, then we will begin the process of sanctification (1Cor. 1:30; 6:11).

Here is an important point: “In justification, as well as regeneration, God acts alone. In sanctification, he works in us but elicits our response to cooperate with him.” And quoting Plumer again, “In justification God imputes to us the righteousness of Christ; in sanctification, he imparts grace, and enables us to exercise it.” This does not mean that grace is some kind of ability or power that we can wield. Rather, grace is a description of our position in Christ. Jerry quoted 2Pet. 3:18 at the start of the book. It says that we are to “grow in the grace and knowledge *of our Lord.*” It is the grace of Christ in which we are to grow, not our own grace. Grace in this verse is the Greek *charis*, from which we get “charity.” It means to enjoy someone’s favor. That’s exactly what Grace is: God’s unmerited favor toward us. It is imparted to us through faith alone in Christ alone at our *salvation*. Grace is, however, our motivating factor in *sanctification*. We do not and cannot exercise this grace directly. Instead, we exercise the *graces* which the Spirit bestows on us as fruit (they are listed in Gal. 5:22-23).⁴ As we exercise them, they grow.

Here’s another important point: Our part in cooperating with the Holy Spirit’s work is the pursuit of spiritual growth. However, although sanctification requires diligent effort on our part, it is dependent upon the enabling power of the Holy Spirit. “I can do all things through him who gives me strength” (Phil. 4:13). We are “*responsible yet dependent.*”

The Goal of Sanctification: to be transformed into the likeness of Christ (2Cor. 3:18). That’s God’s declared intent for believers (Rom 8:29). We are to take on his form by being shaped into his mold or pattern. This is what we call “spiritual formation.” We have been created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness” (Eph. 4:24). We are disciplined so that we may share in his holiness (Heb. 12:10). We are to be holy because God is holy (1Pet. 1:16). This is a process because the change worked in us is “ever-increasing” (2Cor. 3:18).

The Struggle: there will always be conflict within us between the flesh and the spirit. Jerry says the flesh is equivalent to the sinful nature, but only the NIV and the NLT use “sinful nature” for “flesh” (Gr. *sarx*). It is those who *fulfill* the desires of the “flesh” that are “by nature” children of wrath (Eph. 2:3). The Bible says we used to be among them, but *no longer*. We are now God’s workmanship. We are now his *children* by nature, full of grace and of light. We were dead in our sins, but now we’re alive in Christ. We were slaves to sin, but now we’re slaves to righteousness, Romans 6.16-18. If the sinful nature had come into the kingdom with us, then we would still be slaves to it, for the Bible says it was our *master*, Rom 6.14. The flesh, by comparison, is **not** our master. It still has its desires, but we are now led by the Spirit, Rom 8.13-14. We may now

⁴ These Spirit-given graces also include faith (Eph. 2:8-9; 2Cor. 4:13), repentance (Matt. 3:18; Acts 19:4-6), and hope (Rom. 15:13).

choose to abstain from fleshly lusts, and refuse to gratify its desires (1Pet. 2:11; Gal. 5:16). Are we always successful? Of course not. Yet, we're progressing by the power of the Holy Spirit, who is the guarantor of what is to come (2Cor 5:5 NIV). And so we say that the *presence* of sin remains, but the *power* of sin has been broken. The old man with his sinful habits is gone; we are a new creation. Rom 6:6; 2Cor 5:17; Col 3:9-10. And yet we must put off the old (Eph 4:22).

The Process: It is the duty of the Holy Spirit to reveal our sin more and more, and it is our duty to put it away more and more, by the power of the Holy Spirit. He sanctifies us. That is, he cleanses us. How does the Holy Spirit sanctify us? By the Truth. Jesus said to the Father, "Your word is Truth" (Jn. 17:17). So we are sanctified by the Word of God. It is a mirror to our soul (James 1:23-25). "If we are going to pursue spiritual maturity, we must accept the fact that there will be continual tension within us between our desires and our performance." As J.I. Packer says, "our reach will always exceed our grasp." Nonetheless, we reach; we strive. We set the image of Christ as our ideal and we pursue it for ourselves.

The Agent: The Holy Spirit is responsible for our transformation (1Thess. 5:23-24). He acts on us. He works in us continually (Phil. 1:6). Transformation is done to us. And yet he calls on us to cooperate with him in the work. He works in us to will and to act according to God's purposes (Phil. 2:13). Thus, he works in us, and we willfully intend and act, but we only do so because he works in us to do that. We don't know how that interaction works – or as I have put it from time to time, where our will leaves off and his begins. There are times when we know he is at work, and other times when we don't. There are times when we grieve him by our sin (Eph. 4:30), and times when we don't (because our desires are conforming to his desires).

The Key: Jerry doesn't give us the key to transformation at this point. He leaves us at the end of Chapter 4 suggesting that the Spirit's operations are a mystery. His operations may be veiled, but we know that he works through ordinary means. In fact, Jerry lists a number of rational means that the Spirit uses, such as adversities in our circumstances, exhortations and encouragements that we receive from others, learning and applying Scripture, and the frequent use of prayer. The first two means are beyond our control. The second two are things that we can initiate. Either way, how can we know that we are cooperating with the Spirit?

Keep this in mind: we please the Spirit when our will is aligned with the will of God, when the things we want are the things he wants for us, when we are acting out of a sincere desire to please him, and when we are being controlled by the Spirit and not by the desires of the flesh (Rom. 8:8-9; 12-13). We do *not* want to use our *circumstances* as the measure of God's pleasure with us. Good times don't mean pleasure, nor do bad times mean displeasure. All circumstances are means by which God disciplines us: training us up in righteousness as his dearly beloved children. He is teaching us to be content whether we have a lot or a little, whether the times are good or bad, and whether adversity is strong or weak. The extent of our contentment is the mark of our spiritual growth.

Now the tough question: If being aligned with the will of God is the test of our cooperation, then how do we know we are aligned with the will of God? Let's try a simpler question first. Where do we find God's will? That's in the next chapter.

Chapter 5 – Growing through the Word of God

The primary means of growth God has given us is his word. “Like newborn babies, desire the pure milk of the word [*logikos*], so that you may grow thereby” (1Pet. 2:2 NKJV). Therefore, it is vital that we be firmly convinced the Scriptures are the very words of God.

The Scriptures are inspired of God, meaning they are God-breathed (2Tim. 3:16). They do not contain the thoughts or will of men, but of God (2Pet. 1:21). Because the Bible is God’s Word, it is both *reliable* – meaning we can trust it to tell us all we need to know about God, about us, and about his plan of salvation; and it is *authoritative* – meaning it expresses the will of God that we are to obey.

In its pages we find clear indications of God’s grace, and we find the imperatives that flow from such knowledge. The imperatives do not apply to us apart from the indications of God’s grace. The commandments must be driven by that grace, and not by any sense of debt. Christ is the only source of our merit, not our own obedience. God’s moral will is binding on us, but it must not drive us. Understanding the gospel “is as important to our spiritual growth as are the moral commands of Scripture.”

There are four ways we can bring ourselves under the influence of the Bible:

1. Through submitting to the teaching of others – therefore be careful who you choose to teach you. Be like the Bereans, relying on the word of God, not the words of men.
2. Through a consistent Bible-reading program that covers the whole Bible in 1-2 years. The purpose is to apply its truth to the way we live, not just to read.
3. Through Bible-study. Reading gives us width, but study gives us depth. We analyze the text, ask questions, compare passages, determine the meaning of words, and summarize our conclusions. It is best done in small groups with a range of opinions and ideas.
4. Through Scripture Memory. “I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you” Ps. 119:11.

Let me add a 5th way:

5. Through teaching others – there is no better incentive to read, study, and memorize than to teach someone else what you have learned for yourself. Teachers are pupils first.

Although this sounds daunting, we need to commit to growth. Absorbing the Bible is the cost of attaining our goal of spiritual growth. We must choose to no longer be conformed to the pattern of this world, but instead to be transformed by the renewing of our mind through God’s Word (Rom. 12:2). We must commit ourselves to “run in such a way as to get the prize” 1Cor. 9:24. We’ve got to be willing to pay the price, just like any top-notch athlete. If we’re *not* motivated, then we need to remember there’s one sure way to *get* motivated: we can call on the Spirit of God. We can ask him to motivate us, to move us to will and to act according to God’s purposes for us (Phil. 2:13). God’s purposes for us *require* that we grow. Therefore, the Spirit will grant our request, because that’s exactly what God wants for us. See how it works?

Chapter 6 – The Key to Transformation

Jerry tells us that **growing into Christlikeness requires us to develop bible-based convictions.** That's a profound statement with vast implications. "A conviction is a determinative belief." In other words, it isn't just a belief like "the sky is blue." It is a belief that enables me to determine a course of action. If I believe that gravity affects me, then I will be cautious near a cliff. But these aren't just any determinative beliefs that Jerry is talking about. They're bible-based beliefs. Once more we are confronted by the absolute necessity of Scripture-knowledge to guide our thoughts and our actions. Without a knowledge of Scripture, we will continue to be conformed to the patterns of this world (Rom. 12:2). It is the bible that renews our mind, and enables us to test and approve what God's will is.

Jerry points out that we all have convictions. The only issue is where we get them from. We will either appropriate the convictions and values of the world, or we will set those aside and embrace the ones we are given from the Word of God by the Holy Spirit. This is our spiritual renewal, our spiritual transformation. Inherent in this transformation is recognizing and controlling what we allow to influence us. We choose the source of our influence. It is either the World or the Word. Jerry suggests there is a continuum between these two points. We are more or less influenced by the World or the Word. Two things determine whether we are more influenced by the World or the Word (from Ps. 1:1-3):

1. our *attitude* toward the Word of God, and
2. the amount of *time* we spend thinking about it.

Attitude: The person who is predominantly influenced by the Word will delight in the law of God. He will see it as beneficial both for pleasing God, and for living a productive and satisfying life. It is not a burdensome set of rules, but a means of attaining peace and unity through grace.

Time: The person who is predominantly influenced by the Word will meditate on God's law day and night (consistently and habitually), thinking about its meaning and its present application to how he lives. "I have considered my ways and have turned my steps to your statutes" Ps. 119:59.

Meditation - Now Jerry gets to the meat of it: "Meditation on Scripture is a *discipline*. We must commit ourselves to be proactive," memorizing key passages, and watching for opportunities to apply their truth in practical ways. We must *choose* to meditate instead of getting distracted by some other activity. If we are passive, we will succumb to the influence of the World. If we are not actively, consciously, and intentionally pursuing the influence of the Word, we will be drawn back to the influence of the World. As Matt Heard puts it, we need to swim upstream or else be swept downstream by our inaction.

Transformation – "Be transformed" is both an imperative and a passive phrase. Transformation is done to us, yet we are commanded to let it happen. Paul was essentially saying, "Bring yourself under the transforming influence of the Word of God." *This* is how we develop bible-based convictions. It is to be a present, ongoing process in our life. It involves not only our minds, but our hearts and wills. We come into the pages of Scripture to be taught by the Spirit. And so we come in humble expectation, asking for his guidance and wisdom, admitting our own

ignorance and stubbornness. I am always shocked by how little I know. After 25 years, I haven't begun to plumb the depths of the glory and majesty of God. I sit like Job, jaw dropped, having no answer to the barrage of questions being leveled at me by my Creator. I am stupefied, awestruck, and dumbfounded by my pitiful grasp of his wondrous Truth and his perfect character. And so as I open the pages of my bible, I begin to pray. I have come to be instructed in the ways of God, leaving my pride at the door as I step into his schoolroom. I prepare myself to learn from the Spirit who has the mind of Christ (1Cor. 2:16) and knows God's will (Rom. 8:27).

But knowledge alone is insufficient. We are called to know God, yes, but are also called to be transformed into the righteousness of Christ (Matt. 6:33). How will I see my faults without a mirror, and how will I see myself in the mirror if my vision is clouded? I ask the Spirit to reveal my faults to my conscious mind, so that I may confess them, and deal with them openly. This is the application of God's truth to my ways, so that I may change my ways and abide in God's ways instead. Knowledge of the truth, and agreement with the truth, does not equate to obedience to the truth. Knowledge of the truth, without application of the truth, is self-deception (James 1:22). Bible-based convictions require application of what we say we believe to our real-life situations. We don't want to proclaim a truth which is only hearsay. We want to proclaim a truth that we have personally experienced in a life-changing, transforming way.

Jerry reminds us to consider the One who is the source of all good things, and to develop an attitude of thanksgiving and praise:

Memorize Acts 17:25: *And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything, because he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else.* NIV

Memorize Eph 5:20 *always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.* NIV

I think it's also useful to remember the consequences of what we do or don't do:

Memorize Gal 6:7 *Do not be deceived: God is not mocked [outwitted or sneered at]; for what a man sows, that is what he will reap.* NIV

Jerry writes in conclusion,

“Remember, although the Bible may be the primary instrument of transformation, the Holy Spirit is the agent. So He is the One who arranges the circumstances of our lives to give us opportunity to apply Scripture. He is also the One who changes us more and more into the likeness of Jesus Christ. He is the Master Teacher... Our responsibility is to bring ourselves under His instrument – the Bible – so that He can do His work of transforming us...”

Journaling is the only practical way I know of to make these principles a reality and a habit in our daily life. It forces us to read, meditate, and apply the truth of Scripture. It records the outcomes of our learning and our testing so that we can follow the trends of the Spirit's teaching. It prepares us to bring God's Word to bear in every circumstance, taking advantage of every opportunity, every day. Please consider it.

Chapter 7 – Dependent Discipline

Jerry makes three basic points in this chapter:

1. We are desperately dependent on the Spirit for growth
2. Such dependency drives us to fervent prayer
3. Fervent and consistent prayer acknowledges our dependency

We are responsible to grow. It is our duty. And yet we are dependent on the Holy Spirit to enable us to grow. We cannot do it on our own. The power must be Christ's and not our own. This is the single most important principle of spiritual growth: *dependent responsibility*.

I think it is the most difficult principle to apply because, as Jerry points out, “we tend to vacillate between total self-effort and passive dependence.” John 15:5 says, “Apart from me you can do nothing.” And yet we are told, “Therefore, my beloved, . . . *work out your own salvation* with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.”⁵

The Holy Spirit can and does work within us apart from any conscious response on our part. He is not dependent on us to do His work. But we are dependent on him to do our work. . . . There are certain things only the Spirit can do, and there are certain things He has given us to do. . . . Only He can create in our hearts the *desire* to obey God, but He does not obey for us. We must do that; but we can do so only as He gives us the enabling power to obey.

God doesn't help us grow by supplementing our own ability. The Spirit of Christ doesn't “make up the difference” between our strength and what is required for growth. He completely enables us to grow. “We are not just dependent on Him, but we are *desperately* dependent on Him.” It is only when we recognize how impossible it is to be conformed to the image of Christ without Him that we throw ourselves at His feet in complete submission and dependence. We are driven to our knees to plea for the Spirit's wisdom and strength *in prayer*.

The cooperative nature of our growth is always confusing. The Bible tells that unless God builds the house, we labor in vain – it doesn't deny that we build it. Unless God watches over the city, we stand watch in vain – it doesn't deny that we need to stand watch (Ps, 127:1). **It isn't that he does these things through us, but that we do these things through him.** Christ's strength is not a commodity to be received. It comes only through our *union with Christ*. When we correctly understand that union, we are able by faith to rely on Christ working in us through his Spirit.⁶ Let me repeat that marvelous insight: By faith we rely on Christ working in us through his Spirit.

⁵ Phil. 2:12 - Jerry doesn't mention it, but the “therefore” in this verse refers to the glorification of Christ through servanthood: “who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, (*Greek bondservant*) being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.” In other words, in light of his example, we are likewise to reflect the status of our salvation through our works. This is a widely misunderstood verse because of the verb “work out.” It is the Greek *katergazomai*, which in this context means to fashion, i.e. to render one fit for a thing. We are to render ourselves fit to bear the salvation we have already been given by the grace of God. It's like being honored with the gift of a magnificent sword to use in battle in the service of our King. But having no skill to wield it, we are to render ourselves fit to use it by gaining the requisite skill. We work it out; we practice with it, exercising it in fear and trembling at the unmerited favor of having received it, and knowing the responsibility that comes with it. As Christ was charged with the duty to redeem us on the cross, so we are charged with the duty to be his ambassadors in the world. Work out those responsibilities. Get fitted by the power of the Holy Spirit.

⁶ Every blessing we have is in Christ and through Christ, and not in or of ourselves. This is a fundamental doctrine of the Christian faith.

We know that by being in Christ, we can expect him to work in us through his Spirit. That's his will.

The Discipline of Fervent Prayer ⁷

Prayer is the tangible expression of our dependence on Christ. That doesn't mean we can prove our dependence on Christ by perfunctory prayer. **Dependence is an attitude of the heart, not an activity of the mind.** Jerry points to Psalm 119:33-37 in which David begs for guidance: Teach me, give me understanding, direct me, turn my heart toward your statutes, and turn my eyes away from worthless things. The words of his prayer demonstrate his dependence on God.

There are planned prayers, and there are spontaneous prayers (or "ejaculatory" prayers). We begin our mornings with preparatory prayer, and we end our days with prayers of thanksgiving and remembrance. In-between we pray as the need arises by the nature of our circumstances and the temptations which lie before us. We may be overcome by a burden to pray as the Spirit prompts us. There is spoken prayer, and silent prayer. There are public prayers in the corporate Body of Christ, and there are private prayers behind closed doors. There are extended prayers, and short prayers. There are prayers to acknowledge God's blessing, and there are prayers concerning things which have not yet been fulfilled; we persevere in them. Through prayer, we have access to all the comfort and resources of our Father in heaven.

Jerry gives us some topics for prayer that touch on our spiritual growth. "We need to lay before the Lord any areas of persistent sin in our lives: sins such as gossip, irritability, impatience, lack of love, impure thoughts, and undisciplined, wandering eyes. These sins need to be the object of earnest prayer that God would work in us and *enable* us to deal with them... It is always 'by the Spirit' that sinful deeds are put to death." Apart from prayer, we will rely on our own reservoir of strength rather than the Spirit. Therefore, such prayer must be a planned event.⁸

The Sin of Self-Sufficiency

Because the desires of the flesh war against the desires of the Spirit (Rom. 7:19-23), we are prone to be self-reliant. Prayerlessness is our chief indicator of this sin of rebellion. When we succumb to the temptations of the flesh, as God sometimes allows, it is to remind us of our dependence on Him to grow in holiness.

The best way to learn dependence is to develop the discipline of prayer. It forces us to tangibly acknowledge our dependence on the Holy Spirit. Christ admitted his own complete dependence on the Father. "I can do nothing by myself" (Jn. 5:30). He freely and willingly acknowledged it. It was not a reluctant dependence, but an enthusiastic dependence. That's because we were created to be dependent on God. "If we want to grow into Christlikeness, we must pursue not a spirit of independence, but a spirit of dependence." Amen.

⁷ Fervent Prayer does not just mean emotional prayer. "Fervent" means a passionate belief or desire. We sincerely believe that we are entering into the very presence of God. We believe that God is not only capable of answering our prayer, but that he desires to answer it. Because we believe that we are united with Christ, who is our Redeemer, Mediator, and Advocate, we approach God's throne with confidence. And what we pray for is the sincere desire of our heart, not some half-hearted wish, selfish desire, or whimsical fantasy. Such fervency doesn't mean that we should expect anything outside of God's will. And so we are content, whether God's answer is Yes, No, or Wait.

⁸ There is an upcoming lesson on the *Discipline of Prayer* that will address this subject in much greater detail.

Chap 8 – Spiritual Fellowship

Definition: spiritual fellowship is “a relationship of two or more believers who want to help each other grow in Christ.” It’s based on Scripture, so it’s distinct from other forms of fellowship.

According to God’s provision, we are dependent on the Spirit for our growth, *and* we are dependent on one another. We share a *common* life in Christ. If you have any doubts about that, do a word-study on “one another” in the NT and you’ll quickly see how vital we are to one another – individually, not just as the corporate Body of Christ. Jerry points out four key areas of our spiritual fellowship.

- **Sharing:** we don’t just share - we share what God has been doing in our life.
- **Encouraging:** we don’t just encourage - we encourage by reminding each other of God’s great promises.
- **Counseling:** we don’t just counsel - we counsel using God’s word as our guiding light.
- **Praying:** we don’t just pray - we pray that God’s will be done and that his name be glorified in the circumstances of our life.

The Synergy of Fellowship - “One of the most important things we can share with one another is the spiritual truth that God has been teaching us, which might be of great help to fellow believers.” Thus, we enjoy a synergistic relationship between believers. “Two together can produce more than each of them working alone. Two Christians sharing the Word together can learn more than the two of them studying individually...; two people together can help each other up when they fall, or even when they are in danger of falling.” We don’t want to be caught alone when temptation comes knocking at our door. We don’t want to fall down because there’s no one to help carry our burden. We don’t want to stop pushing on because we have no friend to encourage and strengthen us.

We are not to be isolated and alone. We are part of the larger Body of Christ. We are co-heirs not only with Christ (Rom. 8:17) but with one another. We share the “riches of the saints” in common (Eph. 1:18). We share the gifts of the Spirit in common (Eph. 4:11). We can’t do without one another (1Cor. 12:15). That’s why we are commanded not to give up meeting together (Heb. 10:24-25). We should be willing to involve ourselves in the messiness of each other’s lives. “The Puritans used to ask God for one ‘bosom friend’ with whom they could share absolutely everything and maintain a full-scale prayer-partner relationship; and with that they craved, and regularly set up, group conversations about divine things.”

OK. *So what are the principles governing this Spiritual Fellowship?*

1. Spiritual fellowship presupposes fellowship with God – “Fellowship with God is indeed both the foundation and the objective of our fellowship with one another.” Fellowship with God doesn’t mean we need to attain some higher plane of being before we begin. All Christians have fellowship with God through bible reading, submission, and prayer, even new believers.

2. Spiritual fellowship involves mutual commitment and responsibility – we must be faithful in meeting together, being open, honest, and confidential with one another. We must commit to encourage, admonish, and pray for one another; and at the same time we must be willing to be encouraged, admonished, and prayed for. *We cannot transfer our personal responsibility for our Christian walk to another person, nor should we assume responsibility for theirs.*
3. Spiritual fellowship is rare and limited – we make this commitment and share this responsibility with one or only a few selected people. It’s an intentional covenant relationship rather than a presumed one. Because it involves commitment, few are willing to engage in it. But we should also restrict ourselves to a few, not pursuing it with every believer we know.

Accordingly these are the ground-rules:

1. *Spiritual fellowship is scripturally based.* “With my lips I recount all the laws that come from your mouth” Ps. 119:13. “As we share our thoughts with others, we learn because we are forced to organize and develop our ideas.” *Great point!* Reading, studying, and memorizing Scripture should be done in a way that makes it relevant to our life. It requires us to actively listen to one another, instead of just talking at one another. After all, it may be the Spirit that is speaking to us through our spiritual partner.
2. *Spiritual fellowship involves more than exchanging spiritual truths.* It involves sharing our sins, failures, and discouragements, as well as our blessings and joys. Otherwise there can be no mutual exhortation. “Confess your sins one to another and pray for one another, so that you may be healed” Jms. 5:16. Our temptations and sins are common to us all (1Cor. 10;13).
3. *Spiritual fellowship is not just being open, but being accountable.* We admonish one another and we submit to one another. We agree to give an account to one another of our progress according to what we have pledged to do. We open our weaknesses to examination.
4. *Spiritual fellowship is praying with and for one another.* Not all of our prayer needs are appropriate for sharing in the congregation or in our small groups. They require a certain level of trust, which is why we need that “bosom friend.” We should feel free to share it with that person because a trust-bond has been built over an extended period of time. Intimacy must be established before deep sharing is possible. Pray for God to give you that kind of relationship with another believer.⁹
 - In exchanging what God is teaching us, our minds and hearts are whetted and stimulated.
 - If we are not in communion with God and learning from him, we have nothing to share.
 - If we’re not learning from God ourselves, we won’t be alert and perceptive to learn from others.

Small Groups

Small groups are many things because small groups are assembled for various purposes. In the context of spiritual fellowship, they can serve the functions described above if they are small

⁹ **Note:** Be careful not to violate the sanctity of the marriage bed, nor any other covenantal bonds you’ve established with others – that’s from me, not from Jerry. Enjoying confidentiality with one person does not justify breaking a confidence that we share with someone else. We need that other person’s permission to share what has been revealed in confidence, or where privacy was obviously expected. Also, we don’t listen to **hearsay** or **gossip** when we’re counseling one another. That’s part of accountability too. We’re talking to the person in front of us, so we need to focus on what that person actually knows, thinks, and does. Hold each other to that standard.

enough (say three to five people). More often they are simply a cohesive tool employed by large congregations. It is rare to find a small group where each member is committed to growing, has a relationship with God, wants to study the Scriptures, and is willing to open his or her life to examination. For the most part, people join small groups for social contact and a sense of belonging. That's why they tend to be attracted to "ghetto" groups (*my phrase, not Jerry's*) – that means they seek similar age, intellect, education, income, interests, marital status, and culture. It's so compelling that most churches segregate the people in their congregation along those same lines, and then hire a specialty pastor for each segment. I believe that's not only wrong and unbiblical, but it's harmful to the Body. That's true of selecting a partner for spiritual fellowship as well. Don't use artificial criteria – it belies our unity in Christ.

Jerry points out the danger of inequality in commitment or biblical competence. What happens is that someone, often the leader, may suffer from spiritual pride because of his or her "superior" Scriptural knowledge. Discussion either descends into bickering over the minutia of theology, or that person suffocates the other(s) by dominating the conversation and/or controlling its content.¹⁰ Where there is great disparity in competence or commitment, no one grows, and somebody will give up in frustration.

There is a wonderful Puritan adage that Jerry quotes: "Have communion with few, be intimate with one. Deal justly with all, speak evil of none." Those are words to live by. For fellowship to have depth, it must have limited breadth. If it is a small group instead of one-on-one fellowship, then it is necessarily a closed group. That is, it does not invite new members or non-believers to the group, because it does not intend to grow in size. That's not its purpose. There is a danger here, however: it can become insulated and "cozy." I believe it is essential for each person be accountable to serve the larger body, and to evangelize the lost. Perhaps that way we won't become ingrown and co-dependent (*that's my suggestion and hope, not Jerry's*).

God Delights in the Spiritual Fellowship of his People

We need to realize that we have been called into a community of believers: into fellowship with one another, and into fellowship with Jesus Christ.¹¹ God delights in that fellowship, because it is his will that we experience and enjoy it, just as he experiences and enjoys it within the godhead.¹² He has also decreed it as a means by which we grow – sword sharpening sword, bearing one another's burdens, sharing one another's joys. Consequently Jerry says, "If you and I are going to grow spiritually, we cannot play 'Lone Ranger.' We must incorporate spiritual fellowship into our Christian lives." Right on.

¹⁰ Don't read too much into this. Every pastor and every teacher in every church dominates the conversation and controls the content. Some small groups involved in theology, history, marriage-enrichment, and other specialty areas are by definition a lecture-style of group – for most of the time at least. They may go into discussion groups afterwards to discuss the application of what has been learned. Whatever conversation takes place, therefore, will be based on the content of what was presented. The attendees are there because they want instruction and guidance, not because they necessarily want accountability. It is not intended for mutual spiritual growth in the way that Jerry describes it.

¹¹ 1 Cor 1:9 God, who has called you into fellowship with his Son Jesus Christ our Lord, is faithful. NIV; 2 Cor 13:14 May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. NIV; 1 John 1:3 That which we have seen and heard we declare to you, that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ. NKJV

¹² Jn. 17:21-23

Chap 9 – The Instrument of the Gospel

The gospel is a means or instrument of spiritual growth. “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” 2Cor. 3:18 ESV. Thus, beholding the glory of the Lord, beholding the image of Christ, is instrumental in being transformed into that image by the Spirit.

Jerry says that the “glory of the Lord” denotes the presence of God and the revelation of his attributes: he is infinite, eternal, holy, sovereign, good, etc. The glory of the Gospel far surpasses the glory of the Law (2Cor. 3:7-11), and the glory of the gospel is found in its revelation of the glory of Christ (2Cor. 4:4). While the law reveals the glory of God in his righteousness, the gospel reveals the glory of God in both his righteousness, and his grace. That grace is evidenced in Christ going to the cross on our behalf to pay the penalty for our sin, and in his satisfaction of the law on our behalf to meet the requirements of God’s justice.

God’s goal in salvation is to show the incomparable riches of his grace (Eph. 2:6-7). James Fraser writes that the gospel exhibits God’s highest glory, designed to be displayed before sinful men, shining in the face of Christ. The gospel sets forth the glory of Christ by which the Holy Spirit himself is glorified as he honors Christ by influencing us.

The good news is that Jesus died in our place to free us not only from the penalty of sin, but from the domination of sin. In the hands of the Holy Spirit, a clear understanding and appropriation of the gospel will free us from the guilt and grip of sin, and so the gospel is a chief means of our spiritual growth. To the extent that we feel bound by legal requirements, or that our relationship with God is performance-based, our growth is impeded. That’s because such feelings give sin an advantage over us by instilling guilt, which stops action, which impedes growth. What motivates us to grow is the knowledge of two truths: first, that all our sins are forgiven; second, that sin’s domination over us is broken by our union with Christ.

The blood of Christ cleanses our conscience from dead works (Heb. 9:14), and purifies us from all sin (1Jn. 1:7). Therefore, our specific responsibility in pursuing growth is to behold the glory of the Lord (the image of Christ) as it is displayed in the gospel. For that reason, we must keep the gospel continually before us. Christ’s righteousness is the first bookend, and so we make the consideration of his righteousness a discipline. We bathe our minds in the gospel, beholding the glory of Christ in it, and allowing that to cleanse our conscience.

Easy Believism

Does consideration of God’s grace in Christ lead to a lack of obedience on our part? Can we become so grace-conscious that we ignore our duty to obey? No. Why not? Because we are no longer who we were. “We died to sin” Rom. 6:2. That doesn’t mean we no longer sin. It doesn’t mean we no longer respond to sin’s temptation. What it does mean is that the burden of the *guilt* of sin is no longer ours to bear, and sin no longer reigns over us. It’s no longer our master because its primary means of manipulation, which is guilt, has been removed by Christ who has given us a clean conscience.

In Adam we were given over to our sinful nature. We were born into it and enslaved by it. In Christ, we have been set free from that sinful nature, and we have been reborn into spiritual freedom. Whatever influence sin retains over us is what we allow it to retain. It no longer has the power to condemn us, and thus it no longer has the power to rule in our hearts.

“If you do not believe you are dead to sin’s guilt, you cannot trust Christ for the strength to subdue its power in your life... This is an important truth you need to ponder and pray over until the Holy Spirit convinces you of it in both your head and heart.”

The Broken Reign of Sin

Sin is an active “principle” in our life that seeks to dominate us. A principle is a truth that drives our actions. If the principle is survival (i.e. we believe we must survive at any cost), then when our survival is threatened, we fight to save our own life even at the expense of another’s life.

Although it is still active (the bible refers to it as the “desires of the flesh”), sin no longer reigns supreme in our life. We have been united to Christ, and a new principle has been implanted in us. It is the principle of the Spirit. A contest between these two principles has emerged, but the dominant principle is the Spirit. That contest is described by Paul in Romans 7:18-8:15. The translations tend to use the word “law” instead of “principle,” but it is the same thing in that context. George Smeaton writes,

There [is] an internal conflict between flesh and spirit, between an old and new nature. And the strange thing is that, in this conflict, the power and faculties of the Christian seem to be occupied at one time by the one and at another time by the other. The same intellect, will, and affections, come under different influences, like two conflicting armies occupying the [same] ground, [each] in turn [being] driven from the field.

Jerry tells us that we can’t begin to deal with this contest until we acknowledge its presence, and we become convinced that it no longer reigns in us. “Sin shall not be your master, because you are not under law, but under grace” Rom. 6:14). Because we are assured that sin is not our master, we are not to let it reign by obeying its evil desires (Rom. 6:12). We are to put to death the misdeeds of the body (Rom. 8:13), and to abstain from sinful desires (1Pet. 2:11). We choose not to gratify them (Rom. 13:14). If we walk by the Spirit, we will not gratify them (Gal. 5:16).

Walking by the Spirit

We don’t wage this warfare against the flesh in the strength of our own willpower. In the same way that we acknowledge the presence of the principle of sin, we acknowledge the presence of the principle of the Spirit. We’re not passive in this. We abide or remain in Christ by faith. “That is, we are to actively rely on Christ for the enabling power we need to wage war against the sin that remains in us, to put on the positive virtues of Christlike character,” serving Christ in all we do. This is progressive sanctification. What keeps us going in this struggle? It is our belief in the truth of the Gospel, including its promises that we died to sin, that the Spirit now reigns supreme in us, and that our guilt is washed away. The gospel of Christ’s love compels us (2Cor. 5:14).

Section 3 – *The Marks of Spiritual Growth*

Chapter 10 – The Pursuit of Holiness

“One of the first identifying marks of a growing Christian is the *pursuit* of holiness. God has called every Christian to a holy life. There are no exceptions to this call.” We are to be holy because God is holy, and we are his children (1Pet. 1:15-16).

What is holiness? Holiness means separate or set apart. God is holy, and therefore he is separate from his creation and his creatures. He is not an immanent god, as the pantheists believe. Instead, he is transcendent and majestic. He is separate from sin. He cannot be tempted by sin, nor does he tempt us with it. He does not excuse or ignore sin. That’s why Christ went to the cross for us: to atone for it. God *hates* sin. Period.

When we are called to be holy, we are called to separate ourselves from sin, refusing to act on the desires of the flesh. We purify ourselves from them “out of reverence for God” (2Cor. 7:1). We throw off their entanglements (Heb. 12:1), and abstain from our sinful desires “which war against the soul” (1Pet. 2:11). We don’t love the world or anything in the world (1Jn. 2:15-16).¹³ We take “aggressive action to separate ourselves both from the sin within us, ...and from the ever-encroaching temptations of society around us.” We don’t separate ourselves socially, but we do refuse to be influenced by the world. We will not allow it to set our agenda or determine our goals. We use the things of the world, but we are not consumed or driven by them (1Cor. 7:31).

How do we do that?

- Our foundation for living is the grace of the gospel.
- Our power is submissively drawn from the Holy Spirit.
- Our minds are renewed by the Word of God.
- Our behavior is directed by the application of Scriptural truth.
- Our dependence is evidenced and practiced through prayer.
- Our mutual support and encouragement is experienced through fellow believers.

And then comes one further area – the matter of *daily choices*. Many of our choices have moral consequences. In every moral situation, we *choose* which direction to take, either toward sin or toward holiness. “Through these choices we develop Christlike *habits* of living.” Holy habits are formed by making correct choices, repeatedly. This establishes a pattern of holiness. It begins to characterize our life, our morality, and our testimony to the world. Paul says the gospel isn’t a matter of words, but of power (1Cor. 2:4; 4:20). When we look just like the world, the world concludes that Christ has no power. That’s not true (Rom. 1:16; 2Cor. 6:7). However, we must learn to *exercise* it.

The more we sin, the more we are inclined to sin. The more we offer our bodies to righteousness, the more we are inclined toward righteousness (Rom. 6:19). “Sin tends to cloud our reason, dull our consciences, stimulate our sinful desires, and weaken our wills. Because of this, each sin we commit reinforces the habit of sinning and makes it easier to give in to that temptation the next time we encounter it. On the other hand, making right choices tends to strengthen our resolve

¹³ This doesn’t mean that the world is a detestable place with nothing good in it. God created it, and “it was good.” What this speaks to is the fact that we must not be owned or mastered by anything in the world. We are owned by God. He is our only Master.

against sin.” We must train ourselves to be godly (1Tim. 4:7), just as an athlete trains for competition. Such training involves exercise, and that exercise involves making correct choices. We are not to be experts in greed and lust, but in generosity and sacrifice.

Mortifying Sin

“Mortify” means putting sin to death by subduing it, and depriving it of its power over us. Sin is never eradicated from our life, but its habit and its pattern must be broken. Like a garden that is filling with weeds, our daily chore is to rid the garden bed of its current crop of visible weeds. Then good seed may sprout and grow without hindrance. We need to kill the weeds of sin every day, in every part of the garden. If we ignore a portion of the garden, the weeds there will drop more seed and spread their dominion over our life, choking off the good seed.

“We must hate sin for what it is: an expression of rebellion against God.” We cannot mortify impure hearts if we are not willing to put to death resentment. We cannot mortify a fiery temper if we do not put to death the pride that underlies it. Hating a particular sin is not enough. We must hate all sin, because each sin is an expression of rebellion against God. When we ignore a particular sin, it becomes persistent. It disturbs our peace and instills a feeling of guilt. We cling to it, cherish it, and serve it. Holding onto it is not only a rebellion against the sovereign authority of God, but against the love which sent Christ to the cross to atone for it. It grieves the Father in Heaven (Gen. 6:5-6), Christ who is our intercessor (Rom. 8:34), and the Spirit who lives in us (Eph. 4:30).

The Nature of Temptation

James 1:13-15 “When tempted, no one should say, ‘God is tempting me.’ For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone; but each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed. Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death.” Eve saw “that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also *desirable* for gaining wisdom” (Gen. 3:6). Jerry observes, “The perceived benefits of the sin are desired before it is acted upon.” We must learn and constantly remind ourselves that there are no benefits to sin. Kill the desire at its inception.

Mortification involves a struggle between what we *know* to be right (our convictions) and what we *desire* to do. “For the flesh desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the flesh. They are in conflict with each other, so that you do not do what you want” (Gal. 5:17; Rom. 6-8). The Spirit, through God’s Word, convicts us of what is right. That’s what renews our mind. That’s what sets up the conflict with the flesh. That’s how the process of sanctification proceeds. That’s where our choices begin. We don’t mortify our sinful desires because we think it makes us more acceptable to God, and we cannot do it by willpower. It is because of Christ’s righteousness and in Christ’s power alone that we become holy. We pursue holiness because that’s who we are in Christ: a holy people (Eph. 5:3), a royal priesthood (1Pet. 2:9). That’s what God means when he says, “Be holy because I am holy.”

Chapter 11 – The Pursuit of Godliness

For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men. It teaches us to say “No” to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, while we wait for the blessed hope – the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good. Titus 2:11-14 NIV

Jerry asks three important questions with regard to godliness: What is it? What are its marks? How does a person become godly?

Godliness is a personal attitude toward God that results in actions that are pleasing to God. It means that “a person goes about the responsibilities of daily life with an eye focused on God. God is never far from his thoughts, and all of his activities are carried out with the aim of pleasing God.” In its broadest sense, it is walking with God and striving to please him. “Walking with God” means having a close, personal communion with God. This necessarily involves bible-reading, prayer, and obedience.

Fellowship with God

Each morning, we quiet our hearts and minds before God so that we can listen to him speak to us through his Word, and then we speak to him through our prayers. It is a time devoted to God, set aside specifically for fellowship with Him. At a minimum, this time includes bible-reading and prayer. Some people include journaling, which is writing down our thoughts from what we have read, or reflecting on how God is working in our life. It can include intentionally reminding ourselves of God’s goodness and grace in Jesus Christ, which Jerry calls “preaching the gospel to myself.” It is not to read so many chapters of the bible, or cover so many items on a prayer list. The object is to come into the presence of God through a “regular focused time of fellowship with God.”

A Life Pleasing to God

Enoch walked with God, and he pleased him. These are two sides of the same coin. “You cannot please God without spending time with him. At the same time, you cannot have a close, personal communion with God if you are not seeking to please him.” It implies a godly lifestyle. It is not just putting off sin and the old self (Eph. 4:22). It is putting on righteousness and the new self, with its new attitude of mind (Eph. 4:23-24). Jerry suggests that Christlikeness is seeking to put on Christian virtue, which he defines as the 12 fruits of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22-23; Col. 3:12-14): love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control, compassion, humility, and a forgiving spirit.¹⁴ He focuses on two of them: love and humility.

¹⁴ I disagree as it is stated here. Jerry will describe the fruits as products of obedience under adversity in the next chapter. I believe that the fruits of the Spirit are the symptoms, not the goals, of a mature Christian. That maturity is developed in us by God through adversity, but only when we are actively, intentionally, and forcefully bringing the truth of God to bear on our circumstances. I cannot strive to be self-controlled. I *learn* to be self-controlled. Otherwise I’m simply exercising my willpower. Fruits are the signs and evidences of the Spirit’s work in me. I believe we should not and cannot make them our goals. Godliness is obeying the Ten Commandments (or the Rule of Love in Matt. 22:36-40). Over time, the fruits of the Spirit will result from our obedience. The fruits are character traits, while godliness is an attitude that results in *actions* (as Jerry says in his definition). I don’t choose to be faithful today. Instead, I choose to do what I said I would do today. Through repeating acts of binding myself to my word, I prove my faithfulness, and thus a character trait is built in me. I choose not to worry today, and over time I exhibit peace. I think you get the idea. At least, that’s been my experience and how I read it.

The Grace of Love

Love is the overall grace from which all the others grow. “And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.” Col 3:14 NIV Devotion to God is expressed in loving one another; it is validated by it. “Anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen.” 1Jn. 4:20 There is a struggle between not loving others and loving God. We *must* love them *because* we love God. Love is not an emotion. It is an action. “Love inclines us and directs us to be kind, to forgive, to give of ourselves to one another.” Jerry paraphrases 1Cor. 13:

- I’m patient with you because I love you and want to forgive you
- I’m kind to you because I love you, and I want to help you
- I don’t envy what you have because I love you, and I want you to have the best
- I don’t boast about myself because I love you and I want to hear about you
- I’m not proud because I love you, and I want to consider you above myself
- I’m not rude because I love you, and I care about your feelings
- I’m not self-seeking because I love you, and I want to see your needs met¹⁵
- I’m not easily angered by you because I love you, and I want to overlook your offenses
- I don’t keep a record of your offenses because I love you, and love covers a multitude of sins

The Grace of Humility

Humility is “gospel humility” meaning we have a thorough understanding of our need for the grace of the gospel, and we appropriate that grace daily. It is the “primary instrument God uses to produce humility in us.” A person who lives by the gospel will seek to clothe himself with humility because he knows that whatever he has, whatever he enjoys, whatever he achieves, is by God’s grace alone – it has been given to him, not earned by him. “So you also, when you have done everything you were told to do, should say, ‘We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty.’” Luke 17:10

Humility honors God by seeing the good that is done in us and through us, not by denying it. We are meant to be fruitful. “The one who abides in me... will bear much fruit” John 15:4-5. Take pride in God’s work. Abiding in Christ is setting aside our own wisdom, strength, and merit in order to draw it all from him. We are totally dependent on God’s grace, both in ability and merit. We recognize that we are completely weak and helpless in ourselves, but powerful and useful by God’s grace. And so we must never think too highly nor too lowly of ourselves (Rom. 12:3).

Humility means we don’t compare ourselves with others, striving to be superior in some way. That would be pride. Humility therefore recognizes that whatever anyone has, it is the gift of God’s grace. It should produce thanksgiving and admiration in us, not envy. It’s *our* Body.

Humility in service means we are as willing to do the menial tasks as we are the glory tasks. Christ washed his servants’ feet as our example. The greatest among us will be servant of all.

Practice – As with holiness, we must train ourselves in godliness, practicing our acts of loving kindness and our attitude of humility. As you probably know, they won’t come naturally.

¹⁵ I changed the wording here. Jerry wrote “I want to meet your needs.” That’s sometimes a dangerous thing to do. We are not the Messiah, but sometimes we get a Messiah complex and we try to fix things for others. Allow Christ to be Christ, and be content with being his servant.

Chapter 12 – Trusting God in Adversity

This third mark of the growing Christian is perhaps the most difficult to practice. Trust combines with the pursuit of holiness and the pursuit of godliness to form a firm foundation for the next two marks of Christian growth, which are service and worship. If we're not pursuing holiness and godliness, or if we do not trust God, then our service and worship of God are going to be unstable and misplaced. To explain that statement, I'm going to add a lot to what Jerry says.

In pursuing holiness, we don't just turn from our sin. We *devote* ourselves to God's purposes. In pursuing godliness, we don't just do good things. We *choose* to obey God's laws. And in trusting God, we don't just accept everything fatalistically, like some kind of cosmic karma. Instead, we *embrace* whatever God brings to us because we have come to know who God is.

Here's the important part: we don't trust in the *outcome* of our circumstances, but in their *source*. We cannot expect to always have a favorable outcome for ourselves in human terms. Rather, we expect that God will be glorified through our circumstances, no matter what. In all areas of our Christian life, we strive to become God-focused. We practice the Christian disciplines to get us to that point. It is the destination of our journey, the very purpose of our life: to glorify God and enjoy him forever, and to be conformed to the image of Christ.

In the last chapter I said that "maturity is developed in us by God through adversity, but only when we are actively, intentionally, and forcefully bringing the truth of God to bear on our circumstances." In this chapter, Jerry picks up on that theme, and drives home the purpose of adversity. In his book, *Trusting God, Even When Life Hurts*, Jerry makes this profound statement: **God never glorifies himself at the expense of his people, and he never does good to his people at the expense of his glory.** Our trust is sustained in this tension between God's sovereignty and his goodness towards us. The more we know of each, leaning on Scripture and not experience, the more we trust him. If we understand his sovereignty but not his love, we may become convinced that we are expendable, mere cannon fodder in some heavenly battle. If we understand his love but not his sovereignty, we may become convinced that God owes us life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness – that he exists to satisfy our fleshly desires.

Jerry puts it this way: some Christians think that "God is either sovereign and not good, or else He is good and not sovereign. If He were both, we would not experience and see all the heartache and tragedy that occurs daily around the world." We must believe three essential truths about God if we are to trust him in adversity:

- God is completely sovereign
- God is infinite in wisdom
- God is perfect in love

God is both Sovereign and Good

Lamentations 3:37-38 says, "Who can speak and have it happen if the Lord has not decreed it? Is it not from the mouth of the Most High that both calamities and good things come?" There is a heresy that has become popular among some segments of the Church that good things come from

God and bad things come from Satan. There is talk of being “under oppression” from the Devil and the need to bind Satan in order to escape trials. There is an eschatology which teaches that the Church will escape the Great Tribulation, despite all the warnings of Scripture to stand firm in such circumstances. The Lamentations passage is not isolated. Isa. 45:7 says, “I form the light and create darkness, I bring prosperity and create disaster; I, the LORD, do all these things.”¹⁶ Yet we are prone to worship a god who never lets anything bad happen to us, *if* we are good, *if* we pray, *if*... This is not the God of Scripture, nor does it reflect the grace he has given us.

The word “grace” comes from the Greek words *chairō* and *charis* from which we get “charity.” We tend to equate it with mercy, but that’s not what it is at all. Grace flows from received mercy. Grace is an “attitude of gratitude”, a calm happiness and contentment – despite severe and often unwarranted provocation (1Cor 4:12). That’s when “graciousness” is displayed in all its glory. We are to “grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” 2Pet. 3:18, “who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped [held onto], but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death – even death on a cross!” Phil 2:6-8. Grace springs from our forgiveness and humility.

This grace was evident in the testing of Job. Satan was convinced that if Job suffered without cause, he would curse God to his face (1:11; 2:5). “In all this Job did not sin” (2:10). But he was frustrated and mistaken in the thought that he did not deserve it. He sought to justify himself in the sight of God (40:2). Thus Elihu tells him that God doesn’t owe him anything for his goodness, nor is God affected by his sin (35:6-7). Still, God took pride in his servant Job (1:8; 2:3; 42:7), and God honored him in the presence of his friends (42:8). Elihu describes God this way: “Far be it from God to do evil, from the Almighty to do wrong. He repays a man for what he has done; he brings upon him what his conduct deserves. It is unthinkable that God would do wrong, that the Almighty would pervert justice” (34:10-12). As he considers God’s sovereignty, Job is humbled. And yet, God permitted his servant Job to suffer. How do we deal with that?

As Christians, we know that rewards and punishments are deferred until Judgment Day. Part of grace, and part of trusting God, is our eternal view of life. **We cannot be short-term thinkers.** That’s why we can be gracious with others and patient under our circumstances. We know what’s coming. And that’s why we must trust God. We also know who has come – and what he endured for our sake that God might be glorified in him (Jn 13:31-32), *and* in us (2Thes 1:8-12).

Jerry writes that “neither human beings or the impersonal forces of nature nor other physical circumstances can harm us unless God decrees it.” Not a single sparrow is forgotten or abandoned by Him (Mat 10:29-31). And we are worth far more than many sparrows (Lk 12:6-7). In our pain and suffering, we may think God has abandoned us (as in Ps 10:1 and 13:1). Even Christ on the cross quotes from Psalm 22, “My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?” What we don’t hear is the close of the psalm: “You who fear the LORD, praise him! All you descendants of Jacob, honor him! Revere him, all you descendants of Israel! For he has not despised or disdained the suffering of the afflicted one; he has not hidden his face from him but has listened to his cry for help” (22:23-24).

¹⁶ See also Ex 4:11; Dt 28:28,48,65; 32:23-43; Jos 23:15; 1Sa 2:6-8; 1Kg 17:20; 2Chr 7:13-14; Job 2:3,10; Ps 22:24; Isa 19:22; 54:16; Jer 33:5-6; Ezk 17:24; Am 3:6; 4:6; Mic 1:12; Hag 2:17; 1Pet 4:19; Prov 16:4; Lam 1:5,12; Mat 5:45; Rom 11:36;

God does not abandon us in our suffering, nor is he indifferent to it. What he offers us is the grace to endure it, and his balm of healing (Jer. 8:22). We are no longer the people of Israel in the OT. We are the people of God in the NT. We are in Christ, and with Christ, and not apart from Christ. We are no longer waiting for the Messiah. He has come and purchased us, and drawn us into himself. We are clothed in Christ. When he died, we died. And when he rose, we rose. When he said that he would be lifted up like the bronze snake in the desert (Jn 3:14; Nu 21:8), we too are lifted up in Christ in our suffering – to be seen by the world and by our fellow believers. We share in his suffering in this way, so that we may share in his glory (Rom. 8:17). These are not separate things. We do not suffer needlessly, or without purpose (1Cor 1:5-10).

The Wisdom of God

Now, here's the most difficult connection to make in our suffering: *we are to suffer purposefully*. Jerry tells us that the specific purposes of heartache, tragedy, and evil are never explained to us. Jerry doesn't mean they have no purpose. He means that particular events may not be seen or understood by us in the context of the "big picture," yet God knows their purpose in the moment. No matter what that purpose may be, our purpose in suffering is always understood, and it never changes: *it is to glorify God, and be conformed to the image of Christ*. We are to respond with grace and dignity to what he has brought into our life. Quiet acceptance, honoring God's sovereignty, and acknowledging his love, are glorifying to God. It is speaking what is right (Job 42:8). "God in his love always wills what is best for us. In his wisdom, he always knows what is best. And in his sovereignty, he has the power to bring it about." **That's why we trust him.**

The Discipline of Adversity

Jerry does not distinguish between suffering for the cause of Christ, and suffering simply because this is a fallen world. In other words, he makes no distinction between martyrdom and victimhood. If I suffer because I'm sinful, there is no honor or glory in that, but there is a benefit. I am corrected and turned from my sin. If I suffer for preaching Christ, I can endure such unjust punishment. But if I suffer because of the sin of others, because of rape or murder, because of disease or disaster, because of a drunk driver or a drug-addict, it is far more difficult to see any purpose in it. It is harder to forgive and forget. It is harder to accept it and to glorify God. If God loves me, why didn't he protect me? Jerry doesn't distinguish between the causes of our suffering, however, because there is no distinction to be made. God is sovereign – God is wise – and God is loving. Therefore, *we are never victims*. We are always participants in the suffering of Christ (1Pet 4:13) and in the divine nature (2Pet 1:4). In fact, the mystery of any tragedy is what forces us to trust God, and to grow in grace. We *trust* God's motives.

Submission to Discipline

What benefits do suffering and adversity hold for us beyond being a means to glorify God? Why should we embrace suffering regardless of its cause or its nature? We embrace it because it trains us to be responsible (Heb 12:5-11). It is intended to conform us to the likeness of Christ. "God is treating us as his children" (12:7). When we are wayward, discipline is intended to bring us back to God. Understanding this is how we can submit to it without anger, rebellion, or bitterness. We

are commanded to submit: “Humble yourselves therefore under God’s mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time” 1Pet 5:6. We *trust* that God doesn’t punish us just to be cruel.

For those other causes of adversity, when we haven’t been disobedient, here is God’s promise: “No testing has come upon you except what is natural to man. And God is faithful. He will not let you be tested beyond what you can bear; but along with the testing he will also provide a means for you to stand up under it” 1Cor 10:13. Moreover, we don’t have to grin and bear it. We may always ask for relief from God, just as Christ asked to have the cup taken from him, and as Paul asked to be relieved of his thorn. One purpose of adversity is to recall our dependence on God’s grace. We can ask for relief from God because we know he is able to provide it. We too can accept “no” to relief, because we know God loves us. We *trust* in his purposes.

Notice I didn’t use the word “temptation” in 1Cor 10:13 above. The Greek word is *peirasmos*. It means proving something by experiment (testing), experience, discipline, or provocation; in other words, by adversity. Testing determines a thing’s quality or genuineness. We test the strength of steel by putting it under pressure. It identifies the weak points. We also increase the strength of steel by submitting it to extremes of heat and cold, by bending it over on itself, hammering it, and then reforging it. We purge any impurities by burning them off in the furnace. Why? So that the steel is pure and will not break along its faults – so that it is fit for its intended purposes. It’s the same with us – we are tested by adversity to strengthen us, purify us, and make us fit for God’s purposes (Lk 22:32). That’s not all.

Burning off the dross is how we come to share in God’s holiness (Heb 12:10), as well as Christ’s sufferings. It is never pleasant at the time, we are told, but its effects are lasting. In time it will produce a harvest of righteousness (12:11). It yields perseverance, character, and maturity (Rom 5:3-4; Jms 1:2-4). **God intends us to grow.** We are meant to reach full maturity (Eph. 4:13-16), so that we will become fruitful (Jn 15:16). We must *trust* that adversity is God’s means to help us attain maturity.

Only by considering these things can we learn to trust God, especially in adversity. Then we can agree with Paul who said, “I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us” Rom 8:18.

Chapter 13 – Serving God

The *goal* of spiritual growth is to become Christlike (Rom. 8:29),¹⁷ not only in Christ’s character, but in his work; and his work was to do the will of the Father (Jn. 17:4). “We are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do” (Eph. 2:10). Each of us has an assigned role in the Body of Christ which it is our obligation to fulfill. And it is God’s job to equip us to fulfill that role. This equipping is called a “gift.”

“A spiritual gift is an ability given by God and empowered by the Holy Spirit to perform the specific function within the Body that God has assigned to each of us.”

Our natural abilities, whether they are physical, intellectual, creative, or psychological, are likewise given to us by God. But these abilities are not the same as our gifts, even if our gifts incorporate some of them. Gifts are specifically intended to fulfill the role God has assigned to us in the Body, and that role is not the same for everyone (Rom. 12:3-8). Our gifts are always consistent with our role or function, and they are always exercised in a cooperative venture with other believers in the Body. We use them to serve one another in the Body to mutually build one another up (1Thess. 5:11), for the purpose of disciplining all nations (Matt. 28:19-20).

Principles of Spiritual Gifts

1. *The purpose of all spiritual gifts is to serve others and to glorify God* (1Pet. 4:10). Our gifts are not our property. They are entrusted to us for God’s purposes. Whether they are high profile or low profile gifts, they are exercised for the glory of God.
2. *Every Christian has a gift, and every gift is important* (1Cor. 12:7). Those gifts which are not high profile are accorded special honor, and those with high profile gifts cannot say they don’t need the others (1Cor. 12:21). This is a team effort. We are one in Christ.
3. *Gifts are sovereignly bestowed by God* (1Cor. 12:11,18). They are distributed by the Spirit according to his own plans and uses. We must not envy those gifts which have not been given to us, nor may we disregard those that have. God also determines the quality and extent of our gifts. We are not all equally gifted, even when we share the same gift. This is the lesson of the parable of the talents (Matt. 25:14-30). Here’s the kicker: when we have been given a greater measure of a gift, we also have a responsibility to exercise it to the extent of our capacity; it carries a greater responsibility (Lk. 12:48).
4. *Every gift is given by God’s grace*, according to the grace given to us (Rom. 12:6; 1Pet. 4:10). We don’t deserve, earn, or appropriate a gift. It isn’t merited, and it isn’t given as a reward for hard work.
5. *All gifts must be developed and exercised*. That responsibility belongs to us (1Tim. 4:14; 2Tim. 1:6). It requires diligent effort (1Tim. 4:15). God has called us to excellence in every area of giftedness, whether it is teaching, serving, leading, or being merciful. We don’t simply exercise our gifts; we exercise them purposefully and effectively for God’s kingdom.
6. *The effective use of every gift is dependent on faith in Christ*. We cannot assume God’s blessing on our giftedness. It requires intentional and conscious dependence on Christ for his

¹⁷ “For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son;” Christlikeness is also the goal of our sanctification (see chapter 4). And absorbing the Bible is the cost of obtaining our goal of spiritual growth (see chapter 5).

enabling power (Col. 1:29). “Apart from me, you can do nothing” (Jn. 15:5). We must be diligent, but we must also be dependent.

7. *Only love will give true value to our gifts.* We can exercise our gifts with incredible skill, and yet be nothing more than a clanging symbol if don’t exercise them with love (1Cor. 10:13). It may look impressive, but it will accomplish nothing. Love isn’t separate from or better than gifts. Rather, it is what instills our gifts with value and effectiveness. Love is relationship oriented, as is our service to God. No matter what we do, whether exercising gifts or not, we are to do it with love.

Recognizing Our Gifts

If we are to develop our gifts, we must know what they are. We need to do a self-assessment, and we need to allow others to assess us. We must think of ourselves, with regard to our gifts, neither too highly nor too lowly, but with “sober judgment” (Rom. 12:3). How?

1. Be sure we’re committed to doing the will of God that he has ordained for us. Ninety percent of finding God’s will is our willingness to do it.
2. Because God’s will for us is consistent with the gifts he’s given us, his will is going to involve the exercise of those gifts in the Body.
3. We want to find our gifts in order to fulfill our function in the Body, and not just to find out something interesting about ourselves.
4. Consider how God has providentially led us by what he has given or not given us. When we participate in our local church body through serving in *various* capacities, what have we done that has been blessed with success, and what has met with disaster? In other words, we learn by trial and error, by experience, by trying various things.
5. Consider our natural abilities and temperaments. They aren’t the same as spiritual gifts, but there is a correlation. Perhaps I’m a school teacher, but I don’t know if I’m gifted with teaching spiritual truth. So I try it. It will either be fruitful or fruitless. We must sometimes leave our natural abilities behind if we are to experience spiritual success.
6. Seek out confirmation from other Christians as to our giftedness. Again, this involves jumping in the pool and getting wet. We can’t find out what our gifts are if we’re not willing to get embarrassed by actually trying them all out.

When we exercise our gifts in our area of passion, there is no greater joy or sense of fulfillment. We are doing exactly what God intends for us, and thus we are acting within his will, serving him faithfully.

Chapter 14 – Worship

Here we have the last and the longest chapter in the book. It is extensive because worship is the whole focus, purpose, and end of the Christian Life, the very reason we were created. Everything else in our life, everything Jerry has taught us to this point, is designed and intended to teach us to worship God in spirit and in truth. It is what we will be doing in eternity. Every other activity, from bible study, to discipleship, to evangelism, will end. But worship will never end. We're learning to do it well in this life, even if imperfectly, so that we may honor God eternally in the way he has prescribed for us.

Worship is “both an overall way of life and a specific activity.” It both characterizes us (Jon. 1:9) and it describes our behavior (Ps. 100:2). *I am a Christian and I worship the one true God. I join with the saints to worship God with gladness and joyful songs of praise.* These two things are how we glorify God: we reflect his glory to others in our character and testimony, and we glorify God in our specific acts of worship, giving him all “glory, laud, and honor.”

Worship as a Way of Life

In Rom. 12:1 we are urged to offer our bodies (our lives) as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God, which in practice is our spiritual act of worship. We offer ourselves and our bodies to God as instruments of righteousness (Rom. 6:3), as godly vessels fit for his use (2Tim. 2:21).¹⁸ It is hypocrisy to praise God in acts of worship, without worshipping him in our whole way of life (Matt. 15:7-9). We don't live for God on Sunday, but for ourselves the rest of the week. “A lifestyle of worship is the necessary foundation for all our praise and adoration, both privately and corporately.”

Worship as Praise and Adoration

Praise and adoration is rendering to God the honor that is due him (Charnock). It is directed toward God (MacArthur). God “wants to cultivate within us the adoration and admiration of which he is worthy. He wants us to be astonished at the inconceivable elevation and magnitude and splendor of Almighty God!” (Tozer). And so we ascribe to God the attributes which are his alone in their perfection (Ps. 29:1-2). We meditate and pray over Scriptures such as Isa. 6:1-8; Dan. 4:34-35; Ps. 104; and 1Jn. 4:8-10. We acknowledge and celebrate God's greatness, majesty, sovereignty, holiness, wisdom, love, and justice. We submit to his dominion, and his chastening. We delight in his omniscience and omnipresence. We thank him profusely and ceaselessly for his unwarranted grace and mercy toward us. We are gripped by his transcendence, and humbled before him. We stand in awe of his infinite and incomprehensible nature. We swoon in abject wonder that he should even consider us (Job 7:17; 15:14; Ps. 8:4; 144:3). He alone is worthy of our praise and adoration, for who else is like him? Ex. 15:11; Ps. 35:10; 71:19; 113:5.

¹⁸ Therefore, if anyone cleanses himself from what is dishonorable, he will be a vessel for honorable use, set apart as holy, useful to the master of the house, ready for every good work. ESV

Heartfelt Thanksgiving

We praise God for who he is, and we thank him for what does for us. Thus, thanksgiving is an important part of worship. When we are ungrateful, we steal glory from God (Rom. 1:18). Praise and thanksgiving are a debt owed to God. It must not go unpaid, for he keeps an account of them. He isn't kind to us to force our gratitude. He doesn't demand our thanksgiving. But if we are attentive to his work in our life, we should expect of ourselves, just as God expects from us, to at least say "thank you" to the one who has given us life, the one through whom we experience a joy that supersedes any adversity in our present circumstances. It isn't a cursory or perfunctory, "Thanks!" It is said with full understanding of our indebtedness, and so it is said with all our heart. Everything belongs to God. Everything. Our tithes and offerings are an acknowledgement of that fact. But our thanksgiving is an expression of it.

Private Worship

Worship is both private and corporate. Private worship is a precursor to corporate worship. "If we aren't spending time daily worshipping God, we're not apt to contribute to the corporate experience of worship. We bring our private worship into the community of believers with us. It is like a gift to be laid before the king. It is in the congregated wealth, the full riches of the saints, that God receives his due. If we have dishonored or despised God during the week, then we have nothing to bring with us to the weekly celebration. David says, "I will extol the Lord at all times; his praise will always be on my lips" Ps. 34:1. "Every day I will praise you" Ps. 145:2. It is in the daily repetition, the continuing acknowledgment of God, that worship grows and blossoms.

Essentials of Worship

1. The first essential of worship is that it be done in spirit and in truth (Jn. 4:24). That spirit is the human spirit, the heart, not the Holy Spirit. That truth is the truth of God's word, his revealed will. Our worship must be in harmony with his word. We can have zeal without knowledge, but it's not a compliment (Rom. 10:2).
2. The second essential is that Christ is the veil through which we enter into God's presence. We always come to God through Christ, through faith in him, and clothed in him (Eph. 3:12). That's why we pray in Christ's name, and that's why we worship in his name (see Eph. 2:18; Heb. 10:19). He is our high priest, our only intercessor and mediator. We must come by the blood of Christ. It is only by his merit that we may approach the throne of God with confidence. We are never worthy of ourselves to come before a holy God. The continued presence of indwelling sin continues to taint our worship, and it can only be cleansed in the blood of Christ. Our sacrifice of praise is acceptable to God only through Jesus Christ (1Pet. 2:5)
3. The third essential to worship is a heart free from cherished sin – sin that we knowingly hold onto, and savor, and withhold from God's cleansing. The Lord will not listen to us until it is put away (Ps. 66:18). If we hold something against a brother, and have not forgiven him (Matt. 6:12), or if we have offended a brother and not been reconciled, the Lord will not accept our spiritual sacrifice until we have cleared our debt (Matt. 5:23). We cannot resist the convicting work of the Holy Spirit and expect to worship the Father as if nothing were wrong. Our relationship to the Holy Spirit is our relationship to God. If

we hold onto gossip, or a critical tongue, or unethical practices, how can we please God? We must confess it and be forgiven! We must *repent* of it, and allow God's Spirit to change our heart and our behavior. *Sin separates us from God*. How can we approach his throne bearing our unconfessed and unrepented sins? It's an impossible task. Do not confuse an ongoing struggle with a particular sin with cherishing that sin. We all lose the battle from time to time (1Jn. 1:9). Confess it, be forgiven of it, allow your conscience to be cleansed by the blood of Christ, and then go before God confidently.

Help in Our Worship

Jerry waxes eloquent in this particular portion of the chapter, and I won't repeat what his private worship entails beyond this bare outline: he sets a time before breakfast, consciously and deliberately enters God's presence through the merit of Christ, confesses his sins, pleads for Christ's blood to cover them, and admits that only through Christ may he call God his Father. This cleansing throws him into a celebration of praise and thanksgiving. He counts his blessings. He recalls his past, and God's kind provisions, acknowledging his absolute dependence on God for them. He reads the bible, searching out its principles and commands, its revealed knowledge of God and of his will. And that drives him to worshipping again, and into humble submission:

“Lord, I am willing to receive what you give; to lack what you withhold; to relinquish what you take; to suffer what you inflict; to be what you require; and to do what you send me to do.”

Worship in Heaven

Read Revelation 4:8-11, and 5:11-14 for a glimpse of the heavenly throne, and the worship which even now takes place there. They are reflections of the attitude that our heart should have when it comes before the Holy One, the Creator, El Shaddai, Jehovah Jireh. The very image of God in his throne that is revealed here should force us to our knees. It should create a contrite heart in us, and inspire the kind of worship that knows no words to comprehend the moment. Face to the floor we cry out in tears of wonder and fear, “Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord God Almighty. Let all the earth bow down before him. Let all who hear these words lift their song of praise to the heavens. Let all men know and acknowledge that this is God, the Only God of the universe, maker of heaven and earth, giver and sustainer of life, Just and Loving, Generous and Kind, whose mercies are new every morning. Humble yourselves beneath his mighty hand!”

The Bookends

Jerry began with, and he now ends with this reminder: Place your *trust* in the ***Righteousness of Christ*** by which the infinitely holy God accepts us with joy. Place your *dependence* in the ***Power of Christ*** that enables us to live the Christian life confidently as we grow toward maturity. These two things are the continuing gift of a living Person who is worthy of our perpetual worship.

Jerry, thanks for these lessons, and for your servant's heart.

Appendix A – Outline of Chapter 12 (Trusting God)

1. Life is difficult, and painful
2. A major part of spiritual growth is learning to trust God in adversity
3. It is just as important to trust God as to obey God
4. When we disobey, we defy God's authority and despise his holiness
5. When we distrust, we doubt God's sovereignty and question his goodness
6. The moral will of God is rational and reasonable
7. We need to trust him when circumstances appear irrational and inexplicable
8. To trust God we must view our adversity through eyes of faith, not sense.
9. The faith to trust God in adversity comes through the Word of God alone.
10. Trust requires grace which is applied to us from the Word by the Spirit
11. The Scriptures teach three essential truths about God that we must believe to trust him:
 - a. God is completely sovereign
 - b. God is infinite in wisdom
 - c. God is perfect in love

God is both Sovereign and Good

1. God is sovereign over all of life, including both minor and major events
2. No one and nothing can harm us unless God decrees it or allows it.
3. It may seem that God has abandoned us, but he never does.
4. Though a mother may forget the baby at her breast, I will not forget you. Isa 49:14-16
5. When it seems as though he has forgotten, we must recall what Scripture says is true.

The Wisdom of God

1. If God is sovereign and good, why is there so much heartache and tragedy?
2. The answer is that we don't know, but God does.
3. Even if God explained it, we wouldn't understand it.
4. His ways and his thoughts are infinitely beyond our comprehension
5. Therefore, we have to trust that God is good, even when we don't understand.
6. God in his love always wills what is best for us. In his wisdom, he always knows what is best. And in his sovereignty, he has the power to bring it about.

The Discipline of Adversity

1. The ultimate purpose of adversity is discipline. Heb 12:5-11
2. We are to endure hardship as discipline. It is there to train us.
3. The hardship may or may not result from sin.
4. Either way, its end is to conform us to the likeness of Christ.
5. Part of the sanctifying process of adversity is its mystery: it forces us to trust God.
6. We are disciplined *because* we are God's children. It is there to help us grow.
7. All circumstances and events are God's means to develop Christlike character in us.

Submission to Discipline

1. If we submit to our earthly fathers, we should much more submit to God (Heb 12:9)
2. Submitting gains us the most profit from it.
3. We are not to become angry with God, or charge him with injustice. That is sin.
4. Instead, we submit to his discipline, accepting it as coming from his loving hand for our good.
5. Humble yourselves therefore, under God's mighty hand... 1Pet 5:6
6. We must acknowledge that there is still much in our character that needs improving.
7. We should trust God, believing he is infinite in wisdom, and he knows our needs and limits.
8. Submitting doesn't mean blind acceptance. We may pray for relief and exercise our faith in God.

The Goal of Adversity

1. God disciplines us for our good, so that we may share in his holiness. Heb 12:10-11
2. It isn't pleasant at the time, but over time it will produce a harvest of righteousness and peace.
3. God never brings more pain than is needed to accomplish his purpose Lam. 3:3
4. Sharing in God's holiness is being conformed to Christ's likeness: it is our highest good.
5. The road to holiness is paved with adversity.
6. The discipline of hardship produces peace for those who are trained by it to the point of maturity.
7. Our role in discipline is to respond to it, and acquiesce, even though it makes no sense. As we do, in due time we will see the fruit of the Spirit produced in our lives. The pain is not worth comparing to the glory that will be revealed in us - Rom 8:18.