

Ready, Set, Grow

**A Sermon Preached by
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Carlisle, Pennsylvania
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This is the third message in a five-part series on what disciples do.

1. Worship
2. Live Like Jesus
- 3. Pursue Spiritual Growth**
4. Give and Serve
5. Make Disciples

Other messages in the series are available at www.GrowWithSecond.org.

- ¹ *The LORD is my light and my salvation;
whom shall I fear?
The LORD is the stronghold of my life;
of whom shall I be afraid?*
- ² *When evildoers assail me
to devour my flesh—
my adversaries and foes—
they shall stumble and fall.*
- ³ *Though an army encamp against me,
my heart shall not fear;
though war rise up against me,
yet I will be confident.*
- ⁴ *One thing I asked of the LORD,
that will I seek after:
to live in the house of the LORD
all the days of my life,
to behold the beauty of the LORD,
and to inquire in his temple.*
- ⁵ *For he will hide me in his shelter
in the day of trouble;
he will conceal me under the cover of his tent;
he will set me high on a rock.*

⁶ Now my head is lifted up
 above my enemies all around me,
 and I will offer in his tent
 sacrifices with shouts of joy;
 I will sing and make melody to the LORD.

⁷ Hear, O LORD, when I cry aloud,
 be gracious to me and answer me!

⁸ "Come," my heart says, "seek his face!"
 Your face, LORD, do I seek.

⁹ Do not hide your face from me.
 Do not turn your servant away in anger,
 you who have been my help.
 Do not cast me off, do not forsake me,
 O God of my salvation!

¹⁰ If my father and mother forsake me,
 the LORD will take me up.

¹¹ Teach me your way, O LORD,
 and lead me on a level path
 because of my enemies.

¹² Do not give me up to the will of my adversaries,
 for false witnesses have risen against me,
 and they are breathing out violence.

¹³ I believe that I shall see the goodness of the LORD
 in the land of the living.

¹⁴ Wait for the LORD;
 be strong, and let your heart take courage;
 wait for the LORD!

Psalm 27

We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people's trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming. But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love.

Ephesians 4:14-16

If you listen well to your friends and family, and even to the whispered yearnings of your own heart, you may hear what I do as a pastor: people are hungry. Hungry for hope, for purpose, for deep and abiding relationships.

When I listen to people share more than their superficial feelings I hear *dissatisfaction*. We talk about the pleasures of life; we also talk about being stressed out and too busy; how we're always striving for more and not content when we get it.

I hear *frustration*. We complain about doing work that feels meaningless. Even service that once brought us joy—like parenting or volunteering or helping a neighbor—sometimes seems like drudgery.

I hear *anxiety* about aging. Keenly aware of the brevity of life, we are anxious about the years ahead. Will I be able to retire? What is happening to my body? We become pre-occupied with our health, with finances, with questions that we can't answer.

I hear *fear*. We are afraid of failure, loneliness, and intimacy. Fear keeps us from embracing the best life has to offer.

I hear feelings of *unworthiness*. When we look in the mirror we don't know if we like the woman or man we see.

Have *you* had any of these hunger pangs lately?

There *is* an answer for these hungers. It doesn't come in a book, box, can, jar, or microwaveable container. The answer is a stronger relationship with God. This may sound simplistic, but it's true. Every horizontal problem has a vertical solution. Problems on the earthly, or horizontal, plain can be solved or at least made more manageable by appeal to the divine, or vertical, axis upon which our world spins.

Most of the time, when we feel dissatisfied, anxious, fearful, or depressed we turn to earthly solutions like job change, or therapy, or self-help groups. Or we just tough it out. There is a time and a place for all these solutions, but they rarely work over the long haul. You can lose weight and still have self-esteem issues. You can stop drinking and still be

captive to self-destructive ways of dealing with problems. You can start a new relationship and still feel lonely inside. You can find a great job and still feel like you don't deserve it. Too often horizontal – or human -- solutions are like appetizers: they take the edge off, but they don't meet our deep hunger. We need soul food.

Only *spiritual* solutions, growth along the vertical dimension of life, can feed our souls and equip us to solve our problems. One pastor put it this way:

Change in our lives does not come through struggle, human-effort- without-God, frustration, self-hatred, self-rejection, guilt, or works of the flesh. Change in our lives comes as a result of having our minds renewed by the Word of God. As we agree with God and really believe that what He says in His Word is true ... We begin to think differently; then we begin to talk differently; and finally we begin to act differently.

Good Morning, This is God, Joyce Meyer (2/18)

Vital relationships with God can be life-changing.

Struggling with fear? How 'bout getting to know the Almighty Creator of the Universe? Struggling with loneliness? Re-acquaint yourself with the One who said "I am with you always." Looking for focus and direction? Find out what your Heavenly Father thinks you should do with your life. Down on yourself? Talk to the One who gave His life to set you free, adopted you into His own family, and has promised you an inheritance beyond comparison. Financial problems, marital difficulties, parenting travails: a stronger relationship with God can help with all these things.

Listen again to the first few verses of Psalm 27. Wouldn't you like to be able to say with the Psalmist

¹ *The LORD is my light and my salvation;
whom shall I fear?
The LORD is the stronghold of my life;
of whom shall I be afraid?*

There's a fearlessness, a confidence, here that I think we would all like to have. It's not the naïve fearlessness of one who has everything going for

him. He's got people saying terrible things about him. He feels like he is at war. And still he says, "Yet I will be confident." Confident of what? *Victory!* He knows he's going to be o.k., no matter what comes his way.

Don't you wish you could feel that way when the doctor gives bad news, or the company announces more lay offs, or your girlfriend walks out...and you know this time she means it?

We *can* have that kind of victorious attitude if we're willing to pursue spiritual growth with the same kind of single-minded intensity that the Psalmist did. In verse four he explains the key to his peace and calm in the midst of strife:

⁴ *One thing I asked of the LORD,
that will I seek after:
to live in the house of the LORD
all the days of my life,
to behold the beauty of the LORD, and
to inquire in his temple.*

It sounds like the Psalmist really asked *three* things of the Lord, to live in his house, to behold his beauty, and to inquire in his temple. But those are simply three poetic ways of saying the same thing: "I decided to have as close a relationship with God as I could." In those days to live in a person's house was to be considered a member of their extended family. To live in a person's house meant that you really got to know a person—including their inner beauty. It meant that, like a son or daughter, you could sit at the homeowner's feet and ask questions without fear of rejection.

The Psalmist is saying that the secret to his success is that he made it his goal in life to do one thing: know God deeply and intimately. Instead of looking for money or power or even human love to solve his problems, he looked for God.

- ⁷ *Hear, O LORD, when I cry aloud,
be gracious to me and answer me!*
- ⁸ *“Come,” my heart says, “seek his face!”
Your face, LORD, do I seek.*
- ⁹ *Don’t hide your face from me.*

In Hebrew poetry a person’s face was their approval, their blessing, their smile. More than anything else, the Psalmist wanted to see God’s face. I remember when my 6-year old, Aaron, was just 6 months old. Whenever he was being held by someone else in a crowded room I could see him from a distance anxiously looking all over for his mother’s face. (He didn’t want my ugly mug; he wanted his mom’s beautiful face). And when he finally saw her looking back at him, all was right again in the world; his face would light up. That’s the way it can be with us and God. *We* can see God’s face. We can experience God’s *smile*. That’s if we’re willing to work at strengthening our relationship with Him.

Spiritual growth doesn’t happen by accident. No one drifts into a closer relationship with God. I’ve never met a person who suddenly woke up and said, “Wow, all of a sudden I’ve got a rock-solid relationship with God; it’s like I’ve known him my whole life!” No. Pursuing spiritual growth takes work. It will mean getting up off the couch, turning off the TV, and making it a priority.

The first thing you might want to do is figure out your spiritual growth style. Just like people have different *learning* styles, people have different *spiritual growth* styles. Some people grow best through experiences that involve their heads, others through their hearts or their hands. If you’re a head person, a book or bible study might be exactly what you need. If you’re a heart person, if you make decisions based as much on emotion as intellect, then you might want to try stepping up your personal prayer time or consider going on a retreat or being part of a small group in which you can really get to know others and they can get to know you. If you’re a hands person—get busy. Get involved with one of our missions and ministries. Teach Sunday School, volunteer with Carlisle CARES, build a home with Habitat, turn a wrench with His Hands auto ministry.

Sunday morning worship alone isn’t enough for spiritual growth. These sixty (or seventy or seventy-five) minutes can pique your interest and calm your fears; it’ll keep you alive spiritually, but you probably won’t be

growing stronger spiritually. You'll need more if you want to have a renewed mind. I've found that worship *plus* at least one other spiritual activity is the minimum requirement for growth. That extra "thing" can be a Bible study or a small group experience or working among the poor. It's in those forums that faith becomes personal, where we are personally challenged to grow.

Another key to spiritual growth is risk-taking; we need to be stretched. Faith is like a muscle. If you only do the same thing all the time, a muscle stays toned, but it doesn't grow stronger: you've got to mix up the exercises, try something different. If you're feeling spiritually stagnant, you've got to stir up the waters. Read a spiritual book from a perspective that's sure to challenge you; don't just confirm your own viewpoint. Mission trips, like the one that just left for Honduras yesterday, are great for stretching us. They put us in a different context, introduce us to new perspectives, and force us to re-examine our thinking about God, the poor, and ourselves.

You absolutely positively *can* build a life-changing relationship with Jesus Christ, *one step at a time*. These relationships are built slowly. It's a lot like getting ready for a marathon. Not many of us could go out and run a marathon right now. We'd *try* and fail. But if we *trained* for several months, some of us might have a fighting chance. That's the difference between trying and training. A lot of people *try* to lose weight or *try* to get fit or *try* to build their relationship with God. The ones who succeed are the ones who *train* for it with the same intensity they would anything else that really mattered to them.

Start with making a *pact*. Tell God and one other person what you want to do and ask for their help in keeping your commitment. Then make a *plan*. Decide what resources or programs you're going to follow to help you grow, and stick to the plan. Make it a *priority*. If you're not pursuing God's heart with all of your own heart, what *are* you pursuing? What *is* getting the best of you? And how's that working for 'ya? Why not put your relationship with God first? Put your spiritual growth activities—worship, bible study, or mission work—on the calendar and don't let anything crowd them out. And then finally, *pray* about all—share your hopes and even your frustrations with God.

Four steps toward spiritual growth. Make a pact. Make a plan. Make it a priority. Pray about it.

Some of this congregation's best opportunities for spiritual growth are described on our website: GrowWithSecond.org. "GrowWithSecond" is more than our web address; we really believe that you can go grow closer to God and other people through the ministries we offer.

Disclaimer time: there is no guaranteed formula for spiritual growth. We're talking about a *relationship* here, not a *recipe*. We can't force spiritual growth any more than we can force a tree to grow. But when a seed gets the right amount of water, fertilizer, and sun, when you put it in good soil and protect it from the wind, more often than not, that seed is going to grow. All we can do is create the best environment for spiritual growth and open ourselves to the process.

God does the rest. Andrew Murray has said,

We have as little power to increase or strengthen our spiritual life as we had to originate it.... All the exercises of the spiritual life...can go no farther than this, that they point the way and prepare us in humility to look to and depend upon God Himself, and in patience to wait His good time and mercy. The waiting is to teach us our absolute dependence upon God's mighty working, and to make us in perfect patience place ourselves at His disposal.

Source Unknown

Don't waste another day wishing you were more confident, fearless, and focused; wishing you had a better relationship with God. Do something. Don't let your hunger eat away at you forever.

God wouldn't have placed that spiritual hunger inside you if it weren't meant to drive you to Him—and to this communion table. It's here that we don't just eat with Him, we take His life inside us and are nourished by His body. Here we find the energy we need to grow spiritually in every way. Come to the table. You won't walk away empty. God says in His Word, "When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart." (Jeremiah 29:13)

A question for you. If five birds are sitting on a fence, and two decide to fly away, how many are left? If you answered five, you're correct, because deciding to fly away is not the same as actually flying. [Alison Freda] Deciding to grow spiritually isn't the same as positioning yourself to do it. How long are you going to sit on the fence?

Take the next step on your spiritual journey today; by the end of Lent you could be flying. Amen.

Dear Friend,

I hope you have been blessed by this message. You can request a free audio-tape or CD recording of this sermon by contacting the church office. We also have a complete sermon archive (including audio-files and PDFs) on-line at www.GrowWithSecond.org/sermons

Second Presbyterian Church is a thriving congregation celebrating over 175 years of service to God and God's people. It would be our joy to help you grow in faith, hope, and love. Please consider being our guest for Sunday worship at 8 or 10:30am. Children's Church and infant and toddler care are always provided.

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