

One question has been at the forefront of my mind in recent weeks. I believe it's a question every sincere believer must ask himself continually: Am I growing in grace?

To me, grace is Holy Ghost empowerment to become more like Jesus. Therefore, to grow in grace means to increase in Christ-likeness through the unmerited power of God's Spirit. Now let's rephrase my question in these terms: "Am I relying on the Holy Spirit to make me more like Jesus - in my home, my ministry, my relationships?"

This question applies especially to mature Christians - people who have built a spiritual foundation over the years through regular Bible study, a consistent prayer life and godly instruction. If this describes you, let me ask: After all your studying, praying and learning, are you still becoming more like Jesus? Are you more compassionate, meek, merciful and forgiving than you were at this time last year? Or has your growth been stunted? Have you settled onto a plateau of zero growth?

Here is one way to tell if you're growing in grace: God has been merciful to you - so, have you in turn been merciful to others? If you're not sure, ask yourself: How do you respond to the hurts others cause you? Are you kind and gentle? Or do you grow angry and bitter? Are you patient and understanding, or irritable and argumentative?

I particularly want to address readers who are involved in ministry -

Are You Growing in Grace?

pastors, elders, lay people, all who have been chosen by God to lead an exemplary life before others. I believe the question of the hour for all of us is this: "Which direction am I going? Am I growing in grace in my calling - or am I becoming less kind?"

Take an honest look at your life over the past year. Think of all the trials you've been through - at home, on the job, in your ministry endeavors. Many of my friends in Christian leadership positions tell me they've faced the most intense testings of their lives during the past year.

Can you honestly say you've reacted to all your troubles with faith, grace, love and mercy? Have you learned through your trials to be more kind, patient, gentle and soft-spoken? Or do you have to admit, as I do, that you've reacted with flashes of anger, harsh words and self-pity reactions that have caused intense stress and sleepless nights?

We all should ask: "Have I reacted to my critics and enemies with

compassion, love, mercy and forgiveness? Or have I reacted with anger, indignation and self-righteousness? Did I have to prove I was right and they were wrong? How many wounds did I inflict on others as I tried to show them how badly I was injured, misunderstood, misrepresented?

"Was it more important to me to maintain my need to be right than to humble myself and turn the other cheek? Did I react in hurt and resentment, when I should have been a healer and a reconciler?"

Peter Reminds Us That Jesus Is Coming Soon - and We Are To Be Looking for His Return.

The apostle Peter describes an awesome day coming when the heavens will pass away, the earth's elements will melt, and everything in creation will dissolve. Therefore, Peter says, we should continually be prepared and longing for our Lord's return:

"Seeing ye know these things before, beware lest ye also, being led away

with the error of the wicked, fall from your own steadfastness." (2.PET 3:17). *"Seeing then that all these things shall be dissolved, what manner of persons ought ye to be in all holy conversation and godliness."* (verse 11). *"Seeing that ye look for such things, be diligent that ye may be found of him in peace, without spot, and blameless."* (verse 14).

The phrase that convicts me most deeply is Peter's warning in verse 17: *"test ye also."* He's challenging us, saying, "You're a lover of Jesus. You claim to be ready and yearning for the Lord's return. And you're always warning others to do the same. But do you live as if Jesus isn't ever coming back?"

"You're supposed to be an example to the rest of Christ's church. So - are you at peace with everyone you know? Is your walk before the Lord truly blameless? I warn you - don't think you can't fall from your steadfast walk. You too can be led away by the error of the wicked."

What is the *"error of the wicked"* Peter mentions in verse 17? It is the mistaken idea that Jesus isn't really at the door. It is a tragic complacency - a lack of concern, a carelessness demonstrated in conversation and lifestyle, at this late hour.

Peter describes those who fall into this error: *"While they promise them liberty, they themselves are the servants of corruption ... if after they have escaped the pollutions of the world through the knowledge of the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, they are again entangled therein, and overcome, the latter end is worse with them than the beginning."* (2.PET 2:19-20).

When Peter uses the word "entangled" here, he isn't talking about people who turn back to gross sins, such as adultery and alcoholism. He's talking about those who get caught up in the fleshly attitudes and motives they had before they knew Christ.

You may testify that you're saved, justified, sanctified; that you've

escaped the lusts of this wicked age; that you're blessed with intimate knowledge of Jesus. But, Peter warns, "There is a danger of being led astray from growth. You can be led back into the bondage of bitterness and revenge... of an unkind, unmerciful, unforgiving spirit... of an uncharitable manner. If you fall back in any of these ways, you'll be worse off than when you didn't know Jesus."

We Become Stunted in Growth When We React Childishly to The Hurts Others Heap on Us.

Paul warned the Ephesians, *"Be no more children, tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine."* (EPH 4:14). You may think, "This verse doesn't apply to me. My foundation is biblically solid. I'm not taken in by all the new gospel fads and frivolous revivals that are distracting people from Christ. I'm rooted and grounded in God's word."

Yet listen to the rest of Paul's verse: *"...carried about... by the sleight of men, and cunning craftiness, whereby they lie in wait to deceive."* (EPH 4:14). Perhaps you can't be fazed by false doctrine. Paul says you could still be carried away by a whole other matter. He's asking, "Are you tossed about by the evil plans of those who oppose you?"

Paul's message calls us to examine ourselves yet again: How do we react to people who call themselves our brothers and sisters in Christ, yet spread falsehoods about us? How do we respond when they question our motives, misrepresent us, seem intent on destroying us? What is our answer when they wound and grieve us to the point of tears?

When Paul commands, *"Be no more children,"* he's telling us, "Those enemies of yours - the ones who use gossip and slander, fraud and manipulation, cunning and craftiness, deception and underhandedness - I tell you, they're all rebellious children. They're devious and spoiled. And they haven't allowed God's grace to do a work in them. So, don't fall

for their wicked, childish games. They want you to react to their meanness as a child would. But you are not to answer them with childishness."

Have you ever seen the way kids behave on a playground? Within minutes, they're spouting all kinds of brattiness. They constantly run up to any adult nearby to complain about some small hurt. And they start arguments with other children, a continual seesaw battle of accuse-and-deny: "Did not!" "Did so!" "Did not!" "Did so!"

Sadly, many Christians fall into these same childish, devious games. I know some who use letters or e-mail to keep up this sort of accusatory tug-of-war. A Christian brother on one side of the world sends an e-mail to his friend, accusing, "My dear brother in Christ, you have accused me falsely, besmirching my character. You've sinned not only against me, but against the Lord. Do you realize you have touched God's anointed? I pray the Lord will show you the danger of spreading rumors about me."

Back comes an e-mail from the recipient: "Beloved friend, I could not believe your recent e-mail to me. You have falsely accused me of gossip and slander. I deny everything that you said I said. You took my words completely out of context. You owe me an apology."

Here comes the reply: "Dear Bill, how dare you deny that you said what I know you said? A friend of mine quoted to me every word you said - yet now you deny you said it. I'm convinced you said it. So, don't tell me you didn't say what my friend said you said, because you really did say it."

Back comes the reply to the reply to the reply to the original e-mail: "Listen up, Jim. I'm going to tell you one time only: I did not say it - period. God bless you. This will be my last correspondence with you. Peace from the Lord Jesus upon you."

They're caught up in the same childish playground game of, "Did not!" "Did so!"

In the next verse, Paul urges us to move on to maturity: *"Speaking the truth in love, may [you] grow up into him in all things, which is the head, even Christ."* (EPH 4:15). He's saying, "You can't help the slights you receive, the hurts done to you, the gossip spoken against you, the fraud and deception aimed at you. Yet you can use these things to grow in grace. View them as opportunities to become more Christ-like. Respond softly, with a meek spirit. Forgive those who spitefully use you."

I know a precious young minister who was grieved by an older pastor. The elder man did him a great injustice - and when the young preacher heard about it, he shot off a scathing e-mail to him. The two men exchanged several red-hot e-mails before the young man finally came to me, confused. He laid copies of the e-mails on my desk and said, "Brother Dave, I'm not vindictive. But when I saw what this man did, it really hurt me. So I let him have it. What should I do now? Would you look at these and advise me?"

I gazed at a few of the top copies and quickly saw that both men were reacting like children. The Holy Spirit told me just what was needed - and I pushed the copies aside. I said to the young man, "Son, call up this pastor personally. Forgive him, show him mercy, and encourage him. Just love him."

The young minister did just that - and God healed their friendship. The joy of the Lord filled both of their hearts, healing their wound. And all it took was one phone call: "Brother, this is wrong. I love you. Let's put it all under the Blood and the healing power of Christ."

Our Growth in Grace Can Be Explosive When We Attempt to Edify Those Who Mortify Us.

"Let no corrupt communication proceed out of your mouth, but that which is good to the use of edifying, that it may minister grace unto the hearers. And grieve not the Holy Spirit of God." (EPH 4:29-30). The root word

Paul uses for "edify" here means "house builder." That word, in turn, comes from a root word that means "to build up." In short, everyone who edifies is building up God's house, the church.

Paul is telling us three important things here about the words we speak: 1. We are to use our words to build up God's people. 2. We are to use our words to minister grace to others. 3. It is possible to grieve the Holy Spirit with our words.

I get deeply convicted as I read the life stories of some of the spiritual giants of the past. These godly men and women were heavenly minded - studious in God's Word, praying often, and concerned about growing in grace. Andrew Bonar, one of the great praying souls of the nineteenth century, rose at 4 a.m. every day to seek the Lord by his bedside. When he died, his elders found two deep indentations worn into the wood floor where he knelt to pray. Other godly men and women like him - people full of grace, love and purity - caused sinners to melt in their presence. As these saints merely walked down the street, Holy Ghost conviction fell on those they passed.

Yet, what strikes me most about these people's lives isn't just their devotion to Christ or the intensity of their prayers. It is also the godly fruit that these things produced in them. Moreover, I discovered a common thread among these spiritual giants: their main concern was to grow in the grace of a pure heart, out of which holy conversation would flow. *"For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh."* (MATT 12:34).

Whether in their homes, in their public service, or with their friends or co-workers - at all times and in all places, these people sought to grow in this single grace: to have holy conversation without guile. Their one goal was to have conversation worthy of Christ, with no corrupt communication coming forth from their mouths.

I've seen many ordinary Christians become mighty in the Lord simply by asking God's Spirit to purge their daily conversation. At one time these people loved to feed on gossip, but now it grieves them just to hear it. You no longer hear them grumbling, criticizing or tearing down others. Now the only things you hear them speaking are words of edification. They speak the language of loving kindness - of good, uplifting, gracious things. To me, these people have become spiritual giants as well.

As a minister of the gospel, I have desperately wanted to remain in God's favor and blessing. And, at one time in my ministry, I begged the Lord to show me what I could do to bless and please Him most. The Holy Spirit put two things on my heart: 1. Make no provision for the flesh to fulfill its lusts. 2. At all times, let your communication be worthy of Christ.

I believe most devoted lovers of Jesus are conscientious about this first point. But are we as concerned about the second one? According to Paul, we are to judge everything we say - all of our conversations, communications and reactions - by this single criterion: "Are my words building up God's house, or tearing it down?"

This question applies especially when we've been wounded by someone. Do we respond to hurts by building up the body of Christ, or by tearing it down? Do we react with words that restore, heal and encourage - or that further destroy God's house?

David Was Not Called "A Man After God's Heart" From the Beginning.

David didn't instantly acquire his status as a man after God's heart. No - he had to grow into it. And one of the ways he did this was by edifying his worst enemy. Saul used every means possible to try to destroy David. Yet nothing Saul did could stop David from honoring and respecting him.

Saul was jealous of David. He lied about him, robbing him of his reputation. He tried to discredit David to his closest friends. And he enlisted others to turn against David. Finally, he chased David out of Israel. And he destroyed those who tried to defend David. Simply put, Saul gave David no rest.

Occasionally, Saul repented, confessing his wrongs to David. He would cry like a baby, "I'm so sorry, David - please, forgive me." But soon he would come after David with even greater hatred.

I believe that of all the people mentioned in scripture, David endured more vile, despicable mistreatment than anyone other than Christ. And it all came from a man who at one time loved David greatly - Saul. Yet, at every turn, David responded by loving and honoring Saul.

At one point, Saul slew eighty-five godly priests in the city of Nob. Abiathar, the son of one of these murdered priests, escaped and sought refuge with David. As the young man recounted the gruesome massacre, David's servants must have been outraged. They probably thought, "Now David can storm Saul's encampment and kill him with good cause. Our captain has the law behind him. He has every scriptural right to take back the kingdom from this murderer. Surely all of Israel will be horrified when they hear that Saul has slain eighty-five priests in cold blood."

Yet when David heard the story, he merely bowed his head and wept. In fact, he personally took the blame for the slayings. He told Abiathar, *"I have occasioned the death of all the persons of thy father's house."* (1.SAM 22:22). David was totally innocent - yet he willingly bore another man's guilt. I believe in that moment, David began to grow in grace. It was a giant step toward becoming a man after God's heart.

On another occasion, Saul was pursuing David, trying to kill him. He and his men stopped to rest in a cave, not knowing that David and

his band were hiding deeper within the same cave. As Saul and his men fell asleep, David's cohorts began conspiring, "This is it - your day of victory and revenge. God has delivered Saul into your hand. Let's kill him now, while we can. You can be king before the day is over."

But David refused. Instead, he cut off a square of Saul's garment before escaping. He wanted it as evidence to prove to Saul later that he could have killed him. But, scripture says, *"It came to pass afterward, that David's heart smote him, because he had cut off Saul's skirt."* (1.SAM 24:5).

From a safe distance, David cried out to Saul in agony. As Saul emerged from the cave, David humbled himself before the king, bowing to the ground and even calling him "father" (1.SAM 24:11). Then David declared, *"Mine hand shall not be upon thee."* (1.SAM 24:12). He was saying, "You can do to me whatever you want, Saul. You can chase me, persecute me, even try to kill me. But I will never lift my hand against you. If I'm going to be avenged, the Lord will have to do it."

Later, when David learned of Saul's death, he didn't rejoice or declare that God's justice was done. He never uttered, "Thank God, I've been avenged. Saul had it coming to him." No - David rent his clothes and wept. *"They mourned, and wept, and fasted until even, for Saul."* (2.SAM 1:12). *"David lamented with this lamentation over Saul... The beauty of Israel is slain upon the high places: how are the mighty fallen!"* (2.SAM 1:17,19).

I sometimes recall my own trying times, when fellow ministers maligned me so badly I was reduced to tears. As I read my journals today, I think, "Lord, what a nightmare. I thought my grief would never end."

Yet during such times, I usually didn't respond with grace and forgiveness, as David did. Instead, I rehashed my stories of woe and mistreatment to my peers. I named the people who hurt me

and retold all the nasty things they did to me. I was reacting like a pouting child - and I became just as guilty as those who maligned me.

My conversation was not worthy of Christ in those days. Yet, in recent years, I have committed to seeking forgiveness from all the people I've reacted to with a lack of grace. And I've tried to be at peace with everyone I know.

Paul Itemizes Six Hindrances To Growing in Grace.

Paul lists six things we must remove from our lives if we are to grow in the grace of Christ: *"Let all bitterness, and wrath, and anger, and clamor, and evil speaking, be put away from you, with all malice."* (EPH 4:31).

Many Christians think a life of holiness consists of diligent prayer, intense Bible study and serving others sacrificially. Indeed, all of these things can contribute to holiness. Yet we dare not skip over these six issues on Paul's list. The apostle says we absolutely must face these things if we are to grow in grace. You could be a missionary, offering your life as a sacrifice, owning no possessions, spending all your time in service to others. But if you ignore the heart issues Paul mentions here, you will grieve the Holy Spirit. Your growth will be stunted, and you'll end up a spiritual zombie.

The first three items on Paul's list - bitterness, wrath and anger - are self-explanatory. Bitterness is a refusal to let go of an old wound or forgive a past wrong. Wrath is a stronghold of resentment coupled with a hope to gain revenge. Anger is exasperation - either a quick, explosive outburst, or a slow burn of indignation toward someone.

We have already talked about "evil speaking," or words that tear down. So, let's look at the remaining two items - clamor and malice. What does Paul mean by these?

As I was working on this message, I took a break and

walked into our bedroom where my wife was cleaning. I noticed that our huge, heavy dresser had been moved to the middle of the room. Obviously, Gwen had moved it so she could clean behind it.

Nothing sets me off more than when my wife tries to move heavy furniture without my help. I'm always afraid she's going to injure herself. Throughout our marriage I've begged her, "Don't ever do this by yourself. Just call me, and I'll help."

When I saw what she'd done, I blasted her: "How stupid could this be? You could have hurt yourself. Why didn't you call me? You know how I feel about this." I moved the dresser back into place, all the while grumbling, "Of all the dumb, unthinking things. Don't ever try this again. You're not Superwoman."

When I got back to my study, I immediately came to the word "clamor." I asked the Holy Spirit to show me what it meant. He answered quickly: "Clamor is what you just did to your wife." A clamor

is a sudden outburst over nothing - an unnecessary hubbub, a loud noise made for no purpose. We cause a clamor when we make a big issue out of something insignificant, or cause a scene rather than trying to help or heal.

I immediately realized what I'd done. I went to Gwen and apologized, "Honey, forgive me. I did nothing here but cause a loud clamor."

The final item on Paul's list is malice. Malice is the desire to see someone else suffer. For many Christians, malice means hoping God will punish someone who wounded them. It's a devilish spirit, and it's usually hidden deep within the heart. In fact, most believers never voice their malice. But eventually it rises up when they learn that their enemy has been stricken. They might have only a brief moment of satisfaction, or even express sorrow for the injured person - but they still have a spirit of malice.

When Paul says, "Put away all these evils from you," he's not talking about a quick fix. He's

describing a process - a matter of growth that takes time. At times, we may fail at ridding ourselves of these evils. But if we will quickly repent, and commit to making things right with the other person, over time these issues will fade away.

Jesus makes it clear: We cannot hold onto unforgiveness, anger or malice. If we don't rid our lives of these deadly issues, we'll remain unforgiven of our own sins. Then our iniquities will pile up against us, in spite of our devotion and good works (see Matthew 6:14-15).

So, examine your life carefully. And remind yourself of these definitions: Grace is Holy Ghost empowerment to become more like Jesus. And growing in grace is increasing in the likeness of Christ through the power of the Spirit. Finally, keep asking the question: "Am I growing more like Jesus by trusting the power of the Holy Ghost?"

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