

If You're Not Growing, You're Dying

Colossians 1:3-12

Today I heard someone speak about their surprise about planning for growth in ministry. They were shocked that we would think ahead and prepare for a time when we outgrow our present facility. My response was that no one ever birthed a baby without hoping and preparing that the child would one day turn 18 and be on his own. Have you ever heard of anyone watch their daughter graduate without praying that she would continue to learn and develop into a mature responsible adult? Every ministry must prepare, plan and grow or it might as well prepare and plan to die.

Likewise, every mind must continually be growing. I so enjoy watching my grandson learn new things everyday. He's growing so fast. Not just in height and weight, but in his mind. He learns new words constantly and the world is an exciting place for him. Even a dandelion blowing in the wind will bring a "WOW!" But just as much I enjoy talking with older saints who are still growing. Oh, their body may have shut down years before, but they never stop asking questions, reading scripture and studying. There are some 70 year olds who are beginning to learn the computer or have begun to read things that they've never taken time to study before. Their minds are sharp because they are still growing. On the other hand, some who are the same age don't want to even attempt anything new. They have a difficult time grasping new concepts (and I don't mean Alzheimer patients). After I talk to them for just a short while the truth always comes out, "I just don't need to learn any of that new stuff."

This principle not only applies to our physical bodies, it also applies to our spiritual life. Just as you feed and nurture a baby, so you must constantly feed and nurture your spirit. Jesus didn't call God's Word, "The Bread of Life" and "Spring of Living Water" for nothing. The scripture contains delicious morsels that are essential for sustaining real life.

As I sadly consider some elder church folk I've met, I wonder when they stopped growing. Just like those who "don't need to learn the new stuff," these people believe they've already heard every sermon and read every word of the Bible at some time or another, so they quit. They completely stop the growth process. And as any farmer will tell you, when the seed ceases to grow, it begins to die. We each have a choice to make. We can choose to grow until we pass from earth into heaven or we can choose to begin to die until our heart ceases to beat. I'm not sure why anyone would choose the latter, but day after day I meet people who've chosen to begin to die. Not physically, but spiritually.

I can give you examples of those who've chosen to die, but I believe it would be better to give you examples of some who've chosen growth over death.

Let me tell you about my Aunt Ethel. She passed away in 2007, but more than 10 years before that the doctors gave her six months to live. Many would have had her go to bed and preserve the weak heart they were sure would give out at any moment. Instead, she continued her daily routine as much as her heart would allow. Yes, she slowed her pace some and even grew weaker and thinner; however, during this time (and in her 70's) she learned how to use e-mail and still had stimulating conversation with anyone who would visit. At one of my last visits with her, she was gravely concerned with her sister's temporary ill health and talked as if her own malady were just a cut or scrape in comparison. Right up until the day she died, she was still growing. The time finally arrived when her body gave out; however, it her mind and spirit are chose life by choosing to grow.

I hope if you've ever driven through Southeastern Ohio, you may have had opportunity to meet Helen. I believe she's gone now; but at age 94, she was still managing the general store that her father had started

in the late 1800's. She sat in the front row of the church so she could hear the pastor because "hearing aids were for old folks." Yes, she'd probably get one when she got "old." Some may have thought her stubborn for not wearing a hearing aid; but she believed it was a sign of not growing. I don't know how many quilts she made each year, but I'm assuming there was one in the frame on the day that her body quit working the way her mind told it to. Although her body showed her advancing years, her mind never stopped working, turning and growing.

Finally, let me tell you about Betty. Somehow, I think everyone thought Betty would never die. Perhaps it was because she never quit asking questions, questioning the answers and growing in her spirit. At age 70 she probably brought more questions to the Bible Study discussion table than anyone in the room. She contemplated every answer and held it up against scripture. When they called to tell me Betty had gone to be with Jesus, I was speechless. It had never really occurred to me that Betty's body would ever stop. Even with white hair and a frail body, she never seemed old enough to die. Her joking was full of love, her fun was youthful and her passion for life and learning were childlike.

So, now, today, I want to ask you, are you growing or are you dying? Yes, those are your only two options. Consider this carefully, it might be the most important question you'll answer this week. I'm assuming since you're reading something other than the daily paper, you're choosing to grow. Colossians chapter one says this:

10 And we pray this in order that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and may please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God, 11 being strengthened with all power according to his glorious might so that you may have great endurance and patience, and joyfully 12 giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the kingdom of light. 13 For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, 14 in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins. (NIV)

Never stop "Growing in the knowledge of God," for everything that is growing bears fruit and everything that is not growing is dying.

Or Maybe It's Growing Like a Bad Weed

2 Thessalonians 1:3

We've been gone for a week. The bad news is no rain fell the entire time we were gone. Everything is so dry, the grass is starting to turn brown. The good news is no rain fell the entire time we were gone, the grass shouldn't need mowed.

And as we pull into the drive we realize we were correct, the grass does not need cut; however, the weeds are more than a foot high. I'm not sure how this phenomenon actually materializes. How can it be that the grass does not grow at all, but the weeds look awful? I suppose if we'd spent more money on better grass seed, the lawn wouldn't look so bad. As it is we (OK, my husband) must spend all afternoon cutting grass that doesn't really need cut in order to cut down the weeds so the yard will look decent.

It caused me to consider the old saying "You're growing like a bad weed." I understand where it came from now, but I also realize I'll never use that phrase to describe anyone I care for. You see I decided that bad weeds grow in spite of having any nurturing or feeding. They grow without water and without care. They grow fast and furious. And unfortunately, they grow wild and ugly.

How easy this is to compare to children. Children who are nurtured and cared for are often more naïve and innocent. They will generally be younger looking and kinder to others. However, children left to themselves, made to survive alone in this world, tend to grow up quickly. They become street smart and world wise. They tend to look older than their years and generally develop bad habits quite young. Just like good grass and domesticated animals, children need years of tender loving care. They need to be well nourished physically, mentally and spiritually. Just like grass in the middle of summer, a child who isn't well cared for and fed will either wither and die or become a weed.

A similar phenomenon is true of our spiritual lives. Without regular prayer, study and devotion our spirits will either wither and die or turn into a weed. As a weed, we might grow, but we'll grow fast and furious. As the Bible says, we'll become puffed up with our knowledge (or lack of it) and be obnoxious Christians. Just like those weeds in our yard that are much bigger and tougher than the grass, we'll think we're better than our well fed friends (especially when they're going through a dry spell). Unfortunately, the Bible says if we allow ourselves to be weeds, we'll only be good for stubble for the fire.

It's imperative that we grow, but it's even more important that we grow properly. If you aren't growing, you're probably dying. Unless you're growing like a bad weed!