

**SCRIPTURE TEXT:** Colossians 1:9-14

**SERMON TITLE:** Spiritual Growth: A Core Value

We are this morning on the last Sunday of a five Sunday series on our congregation's core values. You'll see our five core values on the screens. Please read them with me: LOVE, FAMILY, OUTREACH, HOPE, SPIRITUAL GROWTH. Today, we're discussing SPIRITUAL GROWTH. Our scripture lesson is Colossians 1:9-14. Listen for the word of God.

SCRIPTURE TELLING.

Growth is one subject that we know something about. We've experienced it. On the screen you will see a picture of a baby. That baby is me. Now I don't know exactly how old I was when that picture was taken, but I'm 55 years old today and you can tell that I've grown a bit since those early days. It's rather obvious, isn't it? And that growth has involved a lot of changes—physically, as you can tell, as well as emotionally and intellectually.

Now when it comes to spiritual growth—one of our cores values—we're not talking about changes occasioned by either genetics or environment—we're talking about changes produced as a result of our cooperation with God's work within us.

In the letter to the Colossians attributed to Paul and Timothy, we're given an insight into the nature of spiritual growth. It involves being *filled with the knowledge of God's will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding so that [we may] lead lives worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, [as we] bear fruit in every good work and as [we] grow in the knowledge of God.* It also involves being *made strong with all the strength that comes from [God's] glorious power* that produces patience and joy *in giving thanks to the Father* who has enabled us to *share in the inheritance of the saints of light—the one who has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.*

Now it seems to me that as we grow spiritually in the ways suggested by Colossians, the changes we undergo should be evident in our lives just as the physical growth we experience, in many ways, is plain for all to see. So the question is: What should people see in us that gives evidence of our spiritual growth? One sign of growth in our fruit production: Are we growing in love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness, and self-control?

I get at this question in another way by trying to envision what a fully mature Christian disciple looks like. I did this many years ago when I was at Asbury UMC. I developed *An Agenda for Spiritual Growth* that set some directions for my own spiritual life. This is what I came up with: 1) I seek a new economic life marked by greater sharing, increased freedom from money and possessions, and a movement toward a simpler life that is more just and loving. I am looking to live on less so that I can give more. 2) I seek to be free from upward mobility, status seeking, consumerism and similar cultural ills so that I might more fully become a servant of Christ and others. 3) I seek deeper relationships with others in the Body of Christ along the lines suggested by Paul: *If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together.* (1 Cor. 12:26) 4) I seek continued growth in a spirituality that nurtures me in the presence of God throughout my day. 5) I seek to live a more peaceful life where the enemy is loved and inclinations toward violence, hatred and revenge are yielded to the grace of God. 6) I seek a greater involvement in the church's prophetic task, especially as it involves participation in God's work to overcome social evil in all of its manifestations. 7) I seek to be more intimately and personally connected to the poor, both to minister to them and to receive ministry from them. 8) I seek to share the Good News of Christ more boldly and powerfully, in both word and deed, with those I encounter. So this is my *Agenda for Spiritual Growth*—and I'm still working the agenda all these years later!

Now if we as a congregation are to take spiritual growth seriously as a core value, we need to wrestle with the questions: What does spiritual growth look like? What is the outcome we seek? What changes are required of us to grow? And finally: How can we help one another grow up into the mature disciples that we have said we want to become?

In my own wrestling with these questions, one thing seems clear to me: Spiritual growth is not to be defined by the number of church programs we participate in. Now please don't misunderstand me, participation in worship and Bible studies and Sunday School classes and the like can be helpful in filling us with the knowledge of God's will, but that's not the same thing as actually bearing fruit. The fruit bearing part comes as we act on the knowledge we gain through our participation in the programs of the church.

Let me illustrate what I mean. I have spoken before about the extraordinary ministry of Willow Creek Community Church in Bearington, IL. They worship some 20,000 people a week and have exerted a profound influence upon the American church over the last 30 years.

Well, I recently came across a blog entitled *Willow Creek Repents?* on a religious journal's website. The blog recounts a recent study done by Willow Creek to determine what programs and activities of the church were actually helping people grow spiritual, and which were not. The results of the study led Pastor Bill Hybels to conclude that, in his words, *We made a mistake.*

One of the co-authors of the study summarized Willow Creek's philosophy of ministry in this way: *The church creates programs/activities. People participate in these activities. The outcome is spiritual maturity.* He then noted: *Having put all of their eggs into the program-driven church basket you can understand their shock when the research revealed that "Increasing levels of participation in these sets of activities does NOT predict whether*

*someone's becoming more of a disciple of Christ. It does NOT predict whether they love God more or they love people more."* Bill Hybels has called this research *the wake up call* of his adult life. (*Willow Creek Repent?* in *Out of Ur: Following God's Call in a New World* at [blog.christianitytoday.com](http://blog.christianitytoday.com).) So apparently, spiritual growth is not just participating in church programs, it's about bearing fruit.

So, my brothers and sister, it seems to me that if we are to take spiritual growth seriously as a core value, it's important for us to wrestle with these questions: What does spiritual growth look like? What is the outcome we seek? What changes are required of us to grow? And finally: How can we help one another grow up into the mature disciples that we have said we want to become?