



Spiritual Character

Part 011 - Christian Growth

Making Christ the focal point of our lives

INTRODUCTION

Tonight is a very important session - it concerns how we live here and now. In this spiritual character part of the Life Group Teaching, we seek to build a foundation for dynamic Christian living.

We would like to present a picture of how a Christian grows to have a greater love for God and a living faith that enables them to spiritually lead the Church of Jesus Christ. Specifically, we will learn how to make the cross of Jesus Christ the focal point of spiritual life.

I. WHAT IS SPIRITUAL GROWTH?

Spiritual growth is the continuing work of God in the life of the believer, making him or her actually holy. The word holy means here "bearing an actual likeness to God."

Philippians 2:12- 13,

"Work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, to will and to act according to His good purpose."

We cannot be passive and think that God alone will produce His likeness in us, that all we need to do is sit back and holiness will just be bestowed upon us.

Many illustrations and diagrams have been used to explain the process of spiritual growth.

A. The Ladder or Stairs

Many believers view spiritual growth as a ladder or as a set of stairs that we climb. When we are really spiritual, we consider ourselves to be high on the ladder. However, when we are not spiritual, we are low on the ladder.



B. The Dying of the old self

Others view spiritual growth as a process of exchanging the old sinful self for the new man created in Christ. As the old man dies, the new man comes into being. When that happens, the person grows spiritually.

QUESTION - DISCUSS HOW THESE 2 ILLUSTRATIONS CAN BE HELPFUL AND UNHELPFUL

Diagrams such as this are not necessarily wrong, but as we will see, there is a better way to understand spiritual growth.

AND IT'S ALL ABOUT THE CROSS.

II. THE ROLE OF THE CROSS IN SPIRITUAL GROWTH

Let's look at a few ways in which the Cross plays a role in our Spiritual growth.

A. Growing in Knowledge of God's Holiness

Jer 9:23,24

"Let not the wise man boast of his wisdom or the strong man boast of his strength or the rich man boast of his riches, but let him who boasts boast about this: that he understands and knows me, that I am the Lord who exercises kindness, justice and righteousness on earth; for in these I delight, declares the Lord".

In John 17:3 Jesus says,

"Now this is eternal life: that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You sent."

THE WESTMINSTER CATECHISM PUTS IT LIKE THIS:

Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him for ever.

QUESTION: DISCUSS TIMES WHERE YOU HAVE EXPERIENCED THIS GROWING SENSE OF THE HOLINESS OF GOD

Php 3:8

"I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord".

QUESTION: HOW CAN WE INCREASE OUR REVELATION OF HIS HOLINESS?

B. Learning to Recognise Our Sin

As we grow in our knowledge of God in all His perfection, we grow to know ourselves as well. In particular, we come to know our sinfulness in contrast to the perfect character of God. Growing in understanding one's own sinfulness can be illustrated in the life of Paul, the apostle.

Let's look at how his Christian life progressed:

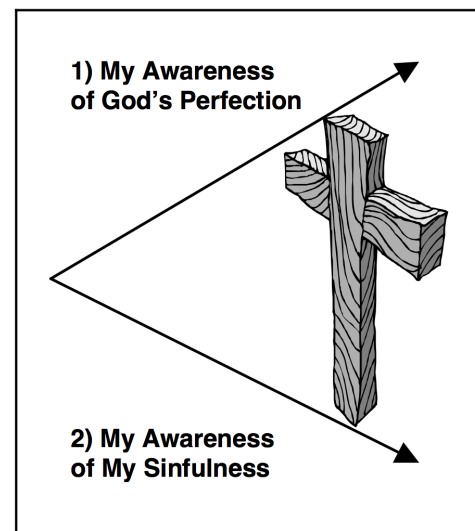
PAUL'S PROGRESS:

- In AD 55 Paul described himself as "the least of the apostles" (1Co 15:9).
- Later in AD 60 Paul describes himself as "the least of all saints" (Eph 3:8).
- Still later, in the end of his life in AD 64, he describes himself as "chief of all sinners" (1Ti 1:15).

C. The Resulting Gap

Realisation of the gap that exists between sinful man and Holy God was, of course, what brought us to faith in Jesus in the first place.

The more we see God, the more we can see our sin and lack, the more we understand about the Gap and the more we can see how amazing the work of the cross is in our lives. And the more we grow.



III. HINDRANCES TO CHRISTIAN GROWTH

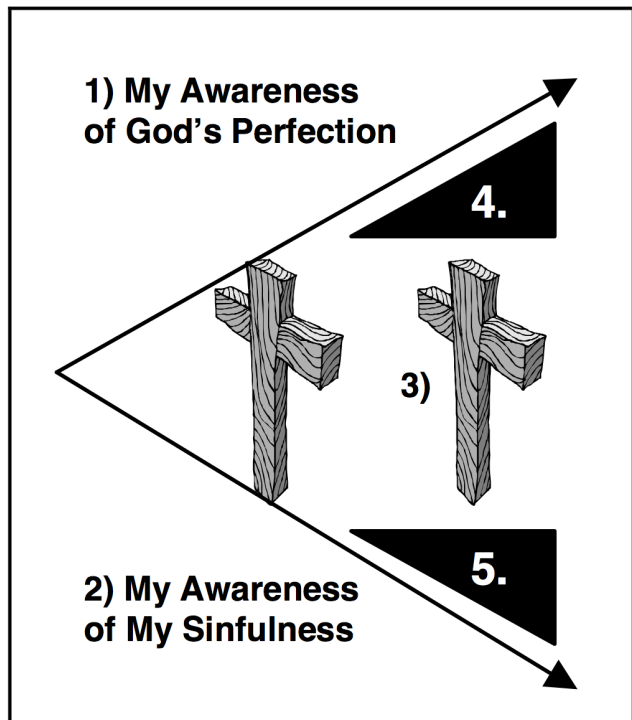
Having at some point accepted the fact that Jesus paid the price to bridge the gap, we strive to move on in our Christian growth.

A. Phariseeism—the problem of pride.

Many believers get caught up in actions and thus fall into the trap of seeking to gain acceptance from God and others through performance. We talked about this a lot last time. Often, the focus shifts off of the work of Christ on the cross onto their service to God. Like the Pharisees in New Testament times, they live as if the Christian life consists only of what we do for God.

He/she (as we can see in the picture) may think that his sin does not matter to God (notice wedge number 4). In such a case, the importance of the cross is diminished. What he is actually doing here is reducing God in his mind to be less than He truly is.

Others may think, "I'm not really that big of a sinner!" These people put a wedge (number 5) in the bottom space beneath the cross.



QUESTION:

WHAT EFFECT DO THOSE TWO WEDGES HAVE ON US?

Isn't it much easier to see someone else's sin than our own sin? Why is this? Is it true that we have less of a problem with sin than others do?

If we think this, we are deceiving ourselves. Because we think too highly of ourselves, again the importance of the cross diminishes.

Matthew 7:3-5

Why do you see the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? Or how can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye', when there is the log in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye.

B. Despair—Lack of belief

Others have a different struggle. They recognise God's holiness, and thus their own sinfulness, and they despair because they do not know what to do about it.

They try to fill the gap with good works, but they feel that they can never do enough good works to really please God.

This can lead to a very up and down Christian life, rollercoaster Christians. When they are doing well, when they've been in great worship, when they've had a victory over something they can be on top of the world.

QUESTION:

ARE THERE ANY WAYS IN WHICH YOU IDENTIFY WITH / RECOGNISE THAT FEELING IN YOURSELF? DISCUSS HOW THAT MAKES YOU FEEL.

Heb 10:14

For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified.

What a verse. What an offering He has made! That He has perfected FOR ALL TIME, that includes now, ALL THOSE who are being sanctified. That includes you. We cannot add to what he has done.

C. The Answer: The Cross must grow

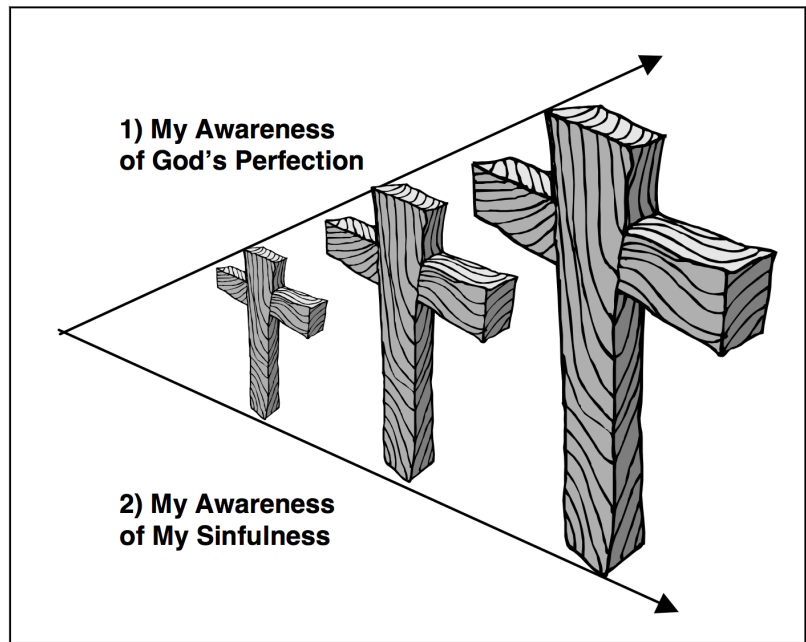
The two problems described above are really similar to one another.

The Pharisee incorrectly believes he can earn God's favour with his own works while the one who despairs correctly knows he cannot earn God's favour by his works.

But in both cases the standard is wrong. The focus on earning God's favour is the foundational problem. Both are based on the same misunderstanding of God's favour and the cross.

Since the problems are similar, the solutions are quite the same.

Basically, in order for the gap to be closed, the cross must grow. Nothing we do can bridge the gap. As Paul said,



Gal 6:14

But God forbid that I should boast, except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ

Conclusion

The cross is our only hope for peace with Him. There is no other place that sinners, even justified sinners, can meet God except at the cross.

None of us ever get so good that we are above the need for the cross. And none of us ever get so bad that we are beyond the help of the cross.

In order to grow spiritually, our focus should be on understanding more fully the realities of Christ's accomplishments on the cross rather than on trying harder.