

1 Co 3:1–2 (ESV) But I, brothers, could not address you as spiritual people, but as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ. ⁽²⁾ I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for it. And even now you are not yet ready,

1. We're all familiar with what is called mental retardation

A. The state where a person ages physically but lags behind mentally – adult body – child's mind

1). Paul speaks of a parallel in the spiritual realm in 1 Corinthians

Believers who grow older in Christ without growing in spiritual maturity

Thought: The difference between the two are important to see

A. Mental retardation – nothing a person can do about this – you're born into that condition

1). Therefore the reaction to that condition should be sympathy and compassion

B. But spiritual retardation is always self-imposed

1). It is a result of spiritual apathy, indifference and a lack of spiritual effort and discipline

a). We don't grow because we choose not to grow

Even though God has given us everything we need to grow

1a). New nature wired for growth

Indwelling Spirit to enable growth

And faithful teachers who provide instruction for growth

C. The Corinthians proved you can have all that and still not grow spiritually

1). They had that new nature – Holy Spirit – best teachers imaginable. Paul, Apollos. Peter

2). Yet Paul says in this passage – when I was first with you I could only give you milk

a). Fine – natural – they were babies – you don't throw a baby a pork chop – “Eat”

b). But Paul is writing some 5 years later and says

“I still can only give you milk. You haven't grown an inch!”

Point: This shows us two things essential to see for this study

A. Growth is not guaranteed just because you are growing older in the Lord

B. Growth is not guaranteed just because you're sitting under good teaching

1). Our churches today are proof of this – filled with so many immature believers

Who have known the Lord for so long but have grown so little

Transition: What we need to see so we don't stay this way is two things

A. Why it's hard to grow. We need to accept that growth isn't natural or easy

B. Then knowing that. What it's going to take to grow

I. WHY ITS HARD TO GROW: WE CONTEND WITH THREE ENEMIES

First Enemy: The World (We still live in the old neighborhood)

1. I'm saved but I'm not taken out of this world

A. I dwell in this ungodly atmosphere that is set against God and His ways

B. So even though I'm given this new nature at salvation that desires to live a holy life

1). I'm called to live that holiness out in an environment that is so unholy – ***so sin promoting***

2. The illustration: Swimming against the tide

A. In this world there is a constant tide of ungodliness flowing against our life

1). Every day you feel it – turn on TV – overhear conversations – radio – billboards...

a). This world is saturated with an anti-god – rebellious mindset

B. Before you were saved it was not a problem – you loved the ways of the world

1). You contentedly drifted downstream in that current

- C. But you repented (turned around) and started to go the other way – towards God
 - 1). But you're still in the world so now you're swimming upstream against that tide
 - 2). It's easy to drift downstream – it takes effort to go up

Point: See why Christian growth isn't easy?

- A. We progress against this constant resistance that is trying to pull us away from God
 - 1). The pleasures, materialism, godless philosophies this world offers
 - 2). All the distractions designed by the devil to cool our passion for Christ

Transition: Growth isn't easy because of the neighborhood we still live in – the world

- A. That wouldn't be a problem if it weren't for the next enemy – the flesh
 - 1). There is a part of us that really likes some of those worldly things flowing past us

Second Enemy: The flesh

So we still live in the old neighborhood and we still deal with the old us

1. Flesh defined: That part of us that still loves sin and the world

- A. That rebellion we inherited from Adam that does not want to go God's way

Point: The flesh is that contact point with the world and its temptations

- A. It's that part of us that tugs at us to give in to sin – to do what we shouldn't do
- B. Even though the flesh's power was seriously diminished at the cross
 - 1). Even though it no longer has the power to force us to sin – we CAN say "No" now
 - 2). It is still a powerful enemy – and will remain so until we are in glory with Christ

Transition: I want to show you two ways the flesh strives with our spirit to make it hard to grow

- A. You need to lock on here – So important to understand this

First: The flesh longs after the things of the world

- A. As we dwell in world – swimming upstream against tide of ungodliness flowing down against us
 - 1). We have this enemy who sees all that rubbish in the tide and wants it
- B. It can be so persistent – like a little kid in a store tugging at the parent's sleeve

"I want that! Please can I have it? Please! PLEASE!"

 - 1). I've watched kids wear parents down – "Alright! You can have it! Just leave me alone!"

Point: Our flesh does same thing – nagging – tugging – trying to wear us down

- A. Lying to us – "If you just give in this one time I'll never bother you again with this"
 - 1). We give in thinking it will take the pressure off – "Just this one time"
 - 2). But you never reduce temptation by giving in – just ignite it – like throwing gas on a fire
- B. We all know this fight well don't we? That tugging, nagging to get us to do what we shouldn't do
 - 1). Look at things we shouldn't look at – say things we shouldn't say

Hear things we shouldn't hear – go places we shouldn't go

Hang with people we should stay away from

- C. My flesh loves sin – wants those things that hinder my growth and cool my life for Jesus

Summary: It's hard to grow spiritually because I still live in the old ungodly neighborhood

- A. It's hard to grow spiritually because I still live with that old me that loves that neighborhood

Transition: But watch this next problem the flesh presents

Second: The flesh resists anything good that we want to do

- A. Not only does the flesh desire all the things I shouldn't be doing – that hinder growth

It actively resists all those things I should be doing that will cause growth

Turn: Ro 7:21–23 (ESV) So I find it to be a law that *when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand.* ⁽²²⁾ For I delight in the law of God, in my inner being, ⁽²³⁾ but I see in my members another law *waging war against the law of my mind...*

- A. V. 22 that new nature given to me at salvation delights in God's ways – desires holiness
 - 1). In that new nature there is no desire to rebel at all
- B. V. 21 we see another part of us – the flesh and the resistance it puts up
 - 1). It wages war against those godly desires that are the new me – desires put there by God
 - 2). Notice: The deadly dynamic – *“Whenever I want to do right – evil lies close at hand”*
Rom 7:21 (NIV) So I find this law at work: *When I want to do good, evil is right there with me.*
 - 3). The picture: Evil (flesh) lies dormant UNTIL I decide to do what is right
 - a). The minute I choose to do good and rise up to do it – it rises up to oppose it

Thought: This is why it is difficult to do those things that cause growth – Bible. Prayer. Church

- A. Excuse after excuse rush into your mind – You need to do this! Turn on the computer instead! Look at your Smartphone – check email – and on and on it goes
- B. You get so distracted – it's hard to concentrate -
 - 1). Doesn't happen when you read newspaper – but when you read Bible!
 - 2). Doesn't happen when want to talk to a friend – but when you want to talk to God
- C. Sunday morning you might not *feel* like going to church
 - 1). Of course you don't – that's your flesh – *Must see this – you're in a war*
Ga 5:17 (ESV) For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, *to keep you from doing the things you want to do.*

Point: You've got to understand why you don't feel like doing spiritual things

- A. You must accept the fact you'll do what it takes to grow against resistance
- B. AND you must accept the fact that you must overcome that resistance and do those things anyway
 - 1). To fail here is to let your flesh tyrannize you and you will not grow

Transition: Starting to see why spiritual growth isn't easy or automatic?

- A. Spiritual growth requires us moving upstream against the tide of the world that flows against us
- B. Spiritual growth requires overcoming the power of the flesh
- C. So we live in the old neighborhood – we still deal with the old us – one more to add into the mix

Third: We contend with an old enemy – The devil

Why I Emphasize old - he has been at this job of deceiving and tempting man for 1000's of years

- A. Scripture tells us he seeks to devour us
1 Pe 5:8 (ESV) Be sober-minded; be watchful. *Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour.*

Question: What does he use to devour us? *The things of the world that tempt our flesh!*

- A. He brings the things of the world our way then subtly whispers in our ear
“Go on, give it a try! What harm is it going to do? Quit being such a fanatic, give yourself a break. Enjoy life a bit nothing bad will happen.”
“Go on Eve, take a bite. Did God really say you'll die! No, He didn't mean it. No harm is going to come from it. Your life will be enhanced NOT reduced.... Take a bite Eve!”
- B. He's really good at making us feel like a victim to justify sin
 - 1). Look at that website! You wouldn't need to if your wife was fulfilling your needs. *Her fault!*
 - 2). Give in to rage and bitterness. Anybody'd feel that way if it happened to them! *Their fault!*
 - 3). Do those drugs. Get drunk. If God had relieved the pressure you wouldn't have to! *His fault!*

- C. Listen to lies like that – act on them – what is happening?
 - 1). The biting has begun – you're in the process of being devoured!
 - 2). We need to take this seriously – just look around and see the victims – that used to be with us

SUMMARY: Growth is not easy or automatic

1. Because we have three powerful enemies arrayed against us

- A. I don't teach this to frustrate you – then why bother?
I teach it to instruct you – so you see and accept what will be required to grow

Transition: Turn to 1 Corinthians 9 – same book

- A. In this section Paul tells these Corinthians who weren't growing what it's going to take to grow
 - B. It's going to take effort – you can only coast downhill – you can only float downstream
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II. WHAT IT TAKES TO GROW: THREE DISCIPLINES

All P's to help you remember – **Perseverance – Plan – Pattern**

- A. Of course this is only for the believer – it can only be done in the Spirit's power
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First discipline: Growth requires **PERSEVERANCE**

1. Paul illustrates this in the way an athlete trains

Look at: 1 Co 9:24–27 (ESV) Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it. ⁽²⁵⁾ *Every athlete exercises self-control in all things.* They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. ⁽²⁶⁾ So I do not run aimlessly; I do not box as one beating the air. ⁽²⁷⁾ *But I discipline my body and keep it under control*, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified.

- A. V. 24 he says to these spiritually slothful believers – who weren't doing what it took to grow
 - 1). Run your Christian race well – Your attitude should be to run with excellence
“What athlete enters a race and doesn't care about how he runs?”
 - 2). What person enters Christianity and doesn't care about how they run?
- B. V. 25 he defines what that caring would look like
Spiritually it's the same as the athlete who wants to run with excellence = **Strict Training**
 - 1). They get up early so they can train whether they feel like it or not
 - 2). Those things that weaken them – they say “No” too
Those things that will strengthen them – they do regardless of what they feel like
 - 3). They **persevere** in this – they are **relentless** – day after day pursuing **excellence**
 - a). To stop is to become weaker – slower – so they don't stop

Point: This is how Paul lived – pressing on in a sustained effort to grow

Php 3:13–14 (ESV) ... one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and **straining forward** to what lies ahead, ⁽¹⁴⁾ **I press on** toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

- A. **Straining forward** = words dripping with discipline and diligence
 - 1). Greek = Pressing **hard** after something – never giving up – a relentless pursuit – maximum effort
- B. **The goal** he's pressing on towards = Spiritual growth – “Christlikeness”

Thought: The reason I used **“Perseverance”** – it's what I see here in Paul's words

- A. Perseverance is the ability to continue doing what's right regardless of the resistance
 - 1). Even though this resistance of the world – flesh – devil is against my growth
I continue to press on – doing what I must do to progress
- B. Without perseverance this constant resistance will eventually overcome you – hinder your growth

- 1). You'll never be what you could be in Christ – never live that risen life

Transition: The Corinthians had everything going for them

- A. But it wasn't linked to this spiritual discipline of perseverance – so they remained infants
 - 1). Just another case of wasted potential in the Christian body

Perseverance

Second Discipline: Growth requires **PLANNING**

1 Co 9:26 (ESV) So I do not run *aimlessly*; I do not box as one beating the air.

1 Cor 9:26 (NKJV) Therefore I run thus: not with *uncertainty...*

1. Growth takes planning – we don't aimlessly drift and hit our goals

- A. Paul says: Just like an athlete plans for excellence
 "I will get up at this time AND I will do this and I will do that"
 - 1). Paul says there is a focus required to grow spiritually – it takes planning
 - B. You have to know where you're going – the goal = **Growth. Christlikeness**
 Then you have to plan on how to get there
Question: Do you want to grow in Christ? Do you want to run this race well?
 Then how are you going to do that? Are you just aimlessly drifting – being intentional?
 - A. Have you determined what time you'll get up? What you'll do when you do get up?
 - 1). Or are you just drifting? Doing whatever you feel like doing!
 - 2). *Remember why you won't feel like it a lot – the resistance of the flesh*
 - a). You can't live like that and grow – your flesh will master you – hinder your growth
 - B. I'm always amazed at how diligently somebody can plan for a vacation – to the minute
 - 1). But have no plan for what is really important – growing
 - 2). Being spiritually sober and alert so they aren't devoured
- Transition:** So growing is a priority – we want to be strong spiritually – we want to run with excellence
- A. That is going to take perseverance – letting nothing stop us from doing what we must do
 - B. Persevere in what? When? That's going to take a plan
 - 1). I am going to wake up at this time and I'm going to do this
 - a). I'm going to pray – I'm going to go through the reading plan
 - b). I am going to read so many chapters a week of a good Christian book
 - c). I am going to church – that should be a settled issue – don't let your flesh decide
 - 1a). We'll never grow if we don't stretch ourselves – commit ourselves - intentional

Third discipline: Growth requires establishing a godly **PATTERN**

1 Co 9:27 (ESV) But I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified.

Intro: This is a bit like persevering – but I wanted to break it into its own category to encourage you

1. The flesh is going to hate your new determination

- A. Some of you are already hearing it starting to whine
 - 1). Your flesh doesn't want to get up early – it wants to sleep in – it loves the snooze button
 - a). Trading in spiritual growth for an extra 30 minutes of sleep – worst trade ever
 - 2). It doesn't want to read the Bible – it has other interests it wants to spend time on
 - 3). It doesn't want to go to church – has a million reasons why you should stay home
 - 4). It doesn't want to serve God – it wants to remain a spectator in the church

- 5). It doesn't want to give to God – it wants to buy toys

Point: To many of us have created deadly habits of letting the flesh have its way

- A. Want to encourage you to start to change that
- 1). To start establishing godly patterns of saying “No” to the flesh and “Yes” to the Spirit
 - 2). Or as Paul put it in v. 27 to **“start disciplining his body to keep it under control”**
 - a). Notice the cost of not doing that – “Disqualification” – not loss of salvation
No longer usable by God – He takes influence away – power away = wilderness
- B. Here is the encouragement – “30 days of doing something develops a habit”
- 1). 30 days of persevering in something will start to create those godly habits you need
 - a). Habits of prayer. Bible. Church. Fellowship.
 - 2). Then these habits become servants that come alongside to aid you in your Christian walk
 - a). Today your establishing habits that hinder you or help you in your growth
- C. ***So persevere for 30 days in that plan – make that a pattern and you'll develop a habit***

Transition: One last thing that is so essential – you must see you can't do this yourself

III. WHAT IT TAKES TO GROW: GOD DEPENDENCE

TURN: Php 2:12–13 (ESV) Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, ⁽¹³⁾ for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

1. There are three parts required for growth in this passage – God's part and ours

- A. Our part: v. 12 – Work out your salvation – notice how serious – with fear and trembling
- 1). Nothing half-hearted about this at all – no drifting in that verse at all – no coasting
- B. BUT we do this because God has done something – v. 13
- Php 2:13 (ESV)** for it is ***God who works in you both to WILL...***
- 1). Notice we are not working for our salvation – we are working out something that is worked in
 - 2). God works in those desires to serve Him – pray – read our Bible – witness – attend church - obey
 - a). All those holy desires come from Him – wired into that new nature
 - b). Then we are to work them out into our life through actions
 - 1a). Respond to what He is doing – what He has done

- C. Notice what God then does to enable this working out

Php 2:13 (ESV) for it is God who works in you, ***both to will and to WORK for his good pleasure.***

- 1). We can only work out what God has worked in through His power – it is beyond us

2. The three-part process (so important to see)

- A. God's part – He works into us those godly desires – “To will”
- B. We respond to that – by working that out – responding to them – This is our choice! Our responsibility
- C. As we step out to obey – do that in depending upon Him to supply the power – “To Work”
- 1). I step out to obey – trusting God to meet me at that point of obedience with the power needed

Thought: We see this balance in two scriptures

Jesus said: Jn 15:5 (ESV) I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, ***for apart from me you can do nothing.***

- A. I can't do anything apart from Him and His strength – I can't persevere in a godly plan for growth
- 1). I'll start but I'll eventually – sooner more than later – return to those old ways
- B. But listen to Paul's words

Php 4:13 (ESV) I can do all things through him who strengthens me.

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- 1). I can't do anything apart from Him – but I can do all things I need to do through His strength

3. Application

- A. All I've talked about is necessary – important choices to grow – we don't want to stay infants
 - 1). You must persevere – plan and establish those godly patterns that becomes godly habits
- B. But none of this is possible in your own strength – you must depend upon Him
 - 1). Start your days off with a fresh surrender – my choice – use my life for your glory
Then add – God give me the grace to live that surrender out – to live for you today
 - 2). Then the goal is to walk through that day establishing a pattern of dependence upon His empowering
 - a). That is for everything – service – rest – rejoicing in Him

Jn 15:5 (ESV) ... *for apart from me you can do nothing.*

That's the gospel isn't it? God has entered into our life to help us do what we need to do. To help us live like we really want to live. To live out what that new nature desires. To live out those godly desires that He has put into us. The gospel says "it is possible in His strength and in His power."

CONCLUSION

1. **We're expected to grow – that is the normal Christian life**
2. **But it's not easy to grow – we have three powerful enemies that resist us**
3. **Therefore we must accept it is going to take effort to grow**
 - A. **Perseverance** = relentlessly pressing towards the mark regardless of the resistance
 - B. **Planning** = you don't drift into growth – like the athlete you must plan what you'll do
 - C. **Pattern** = the encouragement – establish a pattern of saying NO to your flesh – YES to the Spirit
 - 1). A pattern of disciplining your body to do what you must do
That pattern will eventually become those godly habits that are servants in your life
“30 days consecutively will develop into a habit in your life”
4. **None of this can be done in your own strength**
 - A. That pattern should also include learning how to depend upon God's strength in everything
 - 1). You will never sustain those disciplines that growth requires in your own strength
Soon you will weaken and return to those old patterns that keep you spiritually immature
 - B. Learn how to step out in obedience in absolute dependence upon His strength
 - 1). Then you'll be able to say with Paul
Php 4:13 (ESV) I can do all things through him who strengthens me.