

How Believers Grow

By Dave Arch

The church has tried through the generations numerous methods of getting a person to grow spiritually. Whether it be renewing commitments, making vows to God, or the Spanish inquisition; getting people to do what God has said they "should" do has received a major expenditure of energy, time, and money.

Conscientious and dedicated people spend years agonizing over their own lack of spiritual progress as they see themselves returning to the same vices and attitudes.

How does a Christian grow? What are the mechanics behind behavioral change and internal attitude shifts?

To better grasp the concepts presented, Ephesians 3:17-19 has been printed below.

4. . . . that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God."

2. . . . may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp . . .

1. "And I pray that you being rooted and established in love. . .

3. . . . how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge. . .

In order to better understand the picture being painted by the writer, please take a moment to draw a tree over the top of the above verses. Since the bold line represents the ground, please draw the roots of the tree below that line. Then have a trunk coming up out of the ground. Finally, draw the foliage so that it surrounds the verse #4 at the top of the illustration.

As you look at your illustration, you will immediately notice that the order of the verses does not move from the top to the bottom of the paper. Rather they are numbered to correspond to the illustration. So if we look at them in the order in which they appear in the Bible, we would begin with . . .

1. "And I pray that you being rooted and established in love. . .

When reading Ephesians 3:17-19, we find ourselves in the middle of a rather personal prayer that the Apostle Paul is praying for his readers, the Christians at the city of Ephesus. He makes a statement about them that is as true today as it was then! He is stating that every Christian in that day or today is rooted and established in love.

He will be developing a picture of the Christian's growth as that of a tree. Now, at the outset, he addresses himself to the root structure and the soil in which it has been planted.

He calls that soil "LOVE." Take a minute to print the word "love" on top of the soil in your illustration.

He is stating that every believer at the moment that he trusted Christ for his forgiveness is placed deep within the security of God's love.

So what?

God's love has become almost trite and meaningless in its repetition in both sermons, songs, and bumper stickers. Sometimes it takes a passage from the Bible like I Corinthians 13:4-8 to awaken an appreciation for His love. What is His love like? What does His love contain? The passage in I Corinthians indicates that God's love contains patience, kindness, humility, unselfishness, forgiveness, commitment, and never-ending endurance.

Take a moment to print those qualities on your illustration down in the soil next to the roots.

What a rich soil! The nutrients in that soil are perfect for strong and healthy growth!

So why doesn't it happen more consistently?

2. . . . may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp . . .

The reason for not growing can be summarized in one word. That word is "grasp." Literally, the word means "to take for one's own." Like the process of a tree drawing the nutrients out of the soil, a Christian must also FEEL the nutrients of the soil PERSONALLY if growth is to occur.

It is one thing to know that God is kind. It is another to feel that He is kind WITH ME! It is one thing to know that God is patient. It is quite another to feel that He is patient WITH ME! It is one thing to know that God is love. It is another to feel that God loves me! This is the essence of the word "grasp."

This is where growth breaks down. It has nothing to do with the richness of the soil in which the Christian is planted. It has everything to do with how much of that soil is making it into the personal understanding and feelings of that individual.

It would be good to digress for just a moment to explore how this "grasping" occurs. We could list many true Christians who have the right answers about God and what He is like but are not growing. There has been very little behavioral and/or attitude changes.
Grasping Occurs In Relationship

"The body of Christ" as it is used in the Bible to refer to the church is more than just a beautiful analogy. The church IS Christ's own physical replacement in the absence of His own physical body on this planet. If He were physically here, we would gain comprehension by the way He treated us in our relationship with Him. Since, He is not here, we gain comprehension through being emotionally touched by His replacement, the body of Christ, the church.

As I am forgiven by another person, I grasp more of Christ's forgiveness for me. As I am treated kindly by another person, I gain a glimpse and better understanding of His kindness towards me.

There is no other way. If I shut myself off from relationships because of the risk of being hurt; I find myself having great difficulty comprehending God and His attributes. I can get knowledge in seminars and classes. Feelings must come through relationships with others.

Let's take this just one more step. Think about Christians you know who have the right answers but are missing this "grasping" of which we're talking. You will probably find them without meaningful relationships with people who treat them like God treats them.

However, there is one other possibility that requires a mention here. The more a person's childhood was UNLIKE God's present treatment of them, the more difficult this process of grasping will be. In many situations emotional help through the guidance of a professional counselor might be necessary to remove possible blockages in feeling God's love.

3. . . . how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ,
and to know this love that surpasses knowledge. . .

Paul prays that the Christians might understand personally how all-inclusive (wide), how never-ending (long), how extensive (high), and how firm (deep) God's love really is!

Again the emphasis is made in the choice of the word "know" in this section. This word literally means "to know through personal experience." Paul wants them to have so much more than just a mental knowledge! Once again he alludes to the earlier concept of "grasping."

4. . . . that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God."

The ultimate goal of this passage is that the Christian might grow ("filled up to the measure of the fullness of God"). Branches, foliage, and fruit appear on the tree. The branches, foliage, and fruit are then all reflective of the rich soil in which the tree is planted.

Please notice that key word "filled." What a natural process this word suggests. It does not say "worked up." In the word "filled," there is no hint of straining, sweating, or pushing!

However, the word "filled" does suggest that it will take time. Drawing the nutrients out of the soil and up into the trunk of the tree is a process. It will not happen overnight.

With this picture in our mind, other passages in the Bible begin to make more sense. Galatians 5:22 and the fruit of the Spirit makes more sense. Jesus' picture of the vine and the branches from John 15 also becomes clearer in its meaning.

Let's take a moment to just think our way backwards through this powerful illustration. What fruit is NOT currently hanging on your spiritual tree? Are you impatient? Then it only indicates that you have not yet grasped just how patient God is with you! Selfish? Again, you have not yet comprehended how unselfish God treats you. You haven't felt it yet. . . if it isn't hanging on your tree.

The implications of all of this is vast. In our teaching others, we must not call for fruit before we have guided them into a grasping of God's treatment of them. To call for love from a person who doesn't feel loved is to call for an energizing of their human efforts. Dishonesty and spiritual burnout becomes inevitable!

In order for fruit to appear on your tree, you MUST be around other Christians who have already comprehended that which you are longing to feel.

As Paul prayed to his reader, I pray for you:

"And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge -- that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God."

May it happen for you!

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