

**Living on the Growing Edge**  
Men's Bible Study at Park View  
September 6, 2005

Scripture text: *But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.* 2 Peter 3:18

It seems strange to be told to grow. In the physical realm, growth is largely involuntary. As long as you take in food, you grow at the rate that your body dictates. It is difficult to slow it down or speed it up.

Apparently it is different in the spiritual realm. Peter invites Christ's followers to grow in the grace and knowledge of Jesus Christ. What then are the means of growth? How can you tell when it is happening?

Growth in knowledge often comes through specific pursuits, such as reading, Bible study, or participation in a group learning exercise. Growth in grace often comes about when we recognize that we need God's mercy and enablement. It is a process of growing in godly character in response to life situations.

Growth can take place through both willfulness and willingness.<sup>1</sup> *Willfulness* involves the exercise of our will, the desire to stop destructive forces or to make something happen. In the modern world, we exemplify willfulness by our many references to the self in hyphenated expressions such as self-actualization, self-confidence, self-help, and self-taught. Willfulness depends on ego strength. For example, we may decide that God desires a particular thing to happen, so we set about to make plans to help it happen. We grit our teeth and call on God for strength to achieve the goal.

In contrast, *willingness* is expressed as the openness to the wonder and mystery of God's movement in the world around us. For example, we may sense that God is speaking to us about our possessions, inviting us to share more freely with those around us. Or we may sense that God invites us to surrender power or control in various situations, trusting God to be the one who brings everything into accord with his will. We grow in many of the expressions of the Spirit's presence through willingness – love, peace, patience, kindness, and gentleness. We do not necessarily grow in these attributes through planning and study, but rather through the enablement of the Spirit in the midst of difficult circumstances.

Whether by nature or through long practice, some of us prefer to strongly exercise our wills in the pursuit of God's will. Thus, we easily move into new areas of growth through study, exploration, planning, and action. If so, we may benefit by opening ourselves to new ways of growth that invite us to step back into greater willingness. Such growth may involve new ways of listening,

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<sup>1</sup> I'm borrowing this use of these two words from the book *Will and Spirit* by Gerald May.

observing, and acting. It may involve surrender of control and more sensitivity to the needs, plans and desires of others.

In contrast, others of us tend to grow most naturally through willingness. Through long practice, we have learned to give ourselves in service to others. When differences arise, we may give in to the other's ideas rather than create more conflict. We may be reluctant to make specific plans or to set a direction in life, relying instead on others to chart the path for us. If so, we may benefit from pursuing a stronger sense of self-definition. We may do well to decide on a course of action and pursue it in spite of barriers and opposition.

Bible study is perhaps most helpful when we recognize the validity of growth through both willfulness and willingness in our lives. We do well to balance the pursuit of knowledge with the humility to apply that knowledge in unforeseen situations. The Apostle Paul warned that "knowledge puffs up while love builds up" (I Corinthians 8:1).

Balanced growth in grace and knowledge has the following advantages:

- We empathize more deeply with the experiences and feelings of others
- We become more interesting conversationalists
- We gain new energy for life and ministry
- We gain the capacity to serve others in new ways

I believe that God is calling us to grow in both grace and knowledge as we enter a new series of Bible studies. As we began the series on the Ten Commandments, I invite us to pray the prayer that Jesus taught his disciples. More specifically, I invite us to concentrate on the phrase *May your kingdom come, may your will be done* (Matthew 6:10).

This part of the Lord's Prayer may be seen as 1) a yearning for God's in-breaking rule in the world, 2) an invitation for God to be at work in our own lives, 3) an expectation that God will do new things in our world, 4) a determination to do something for God, and/or 5) surrender to God's will. Any of these could be an expression of life on the growing edge.

Ponder these questions:

1. Which of the two ways of growth, *willfulness* or *willingness*, represents the greater challenge for you at this time of your life?
  
2. In what specific way do you sense that God is inviting you to grow in the days and weeks ahead?