

In less than three months our daughter Rachel will get married to a nice Christian young man. It seems like just yesterday that she was born. I always tell couples when they get married that you just rent your children – that after 18 or so years, they go away to college or that they get married. Rachel is 22 and on May 16 she will start the cycle all over again. Now there's Mathew ... oh, well.

We have children, then they grow up. First they are infants, then toddlers, then school and the next thing you know is that they are asking to borrow the keys to the car! It is a process of growth from a baby to an adult and all parents go through it.

This process of growth has a clear parallel in the Scriptures with our growth as Christians. When we become Christians, when we accept Christ as Savior and Lord, we are known as “babes in Christ.” But we are to grow from being “babes in Christ” to mature Christians. In 1 Peter 2:2 we are told “*as newborn babes, desire the pure milk of the word, that you may grow thereby...*” Then we are told that as we grow in Christ that we are to desire “solid food” — again a clear parallel to that of a baby.

Turn with me to 1 Thessalonians 4:1 — our Epistle lesson for today. The Apostle Paul, in writing to the church at Thessalonica, has addressed a number of issues — relevant to the church there, and to us. He begins to sum things up — and remember this was originally a letter — and he says: “*Finally...*” in 4:1. What we have is an exhortation to growth — to please God more and more in their daily walk. It is an exhortation to sanctification as he states in verse 3.

Here in Chapter 4, he specifically addresses the subject of sexual immorality as an evidence of their spiritual growth. Thessalonica was known, as was Corinth, for its variety in sexual appetites. Believers who came from this background could experience problems. It was very hard for them — having accepted one pattern of behavior as normal, to be suddenly told that it was no longer acceptable in the eyes of God — and so they had to change. And they had to do this, because this is what God desires. Notice how Paul says it: 3 “*For this is the will of God, your sanctification*” ... and Verse 7 “*For God did not call us to uncleanness, but in holiness.*”

(While our focus is not specifically on the sexual immorality that Paul addresses, you should know that the word “sexual immorality” translates a Greek word which speaks about a broad spectrum of sexual indulgence, both illicit and unnatural. The term would include practices such as premarital sex, extramarital sex, homosexuality, lesbianism, sodomy, incest, and bestiality. So, don't let anyone fool you into thinking that the Bible does not condemn these types of behaviors — especially in light of certain agendas that we find prevalent in the world today – just think California, Vermont, Massachusetts and other states.)

As I said, we see that the one emphasis that the Apostle Paul is referring to, is something that would be evidence of their growth — that is, their abstaining from all types of sexual immorality. And as important as this is, this is not the emphasis that I would like to dwell on today — because this is only one aspect of our Christian growth — the issue is really our Christian growth in general. Because just as a baby grows — so we are to grow in our Christian faith. The normal part of the Christian life is spiritual growth.

The issue of our Christian growth — known as our sanctification — has a two-fold purpose. As the scripture says, it is the will of God and secondly, it is also a witness — a witness to our fellow Christians and to the non-Christians who know us.

We see that Paul makes this first point very clear in 4:3 (READ): *“For this is the will of God, your sanctification...”* The will of God is that we should grow in our faith and knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ and that we change according to what we learn — just as he expected the Thessalonian Christians to change.

You see, when God moves his Spirit within us, and we accept Jesus Christ as Savior — God does not say — “well, first you must change — you must do this and that — and then gives us a long list of things to do and not to do” — and says that when you complete these, then I will accept you. That’s not the way it works — and we need to be very thankful for this — **God accepts us as we are** — but, then we are expected to grow — just as baby. There is a saying that goes: “God loves us enough to accept us as we are, but He love us too much to leave us that way.”

God has provided a variety of ways in which we are to grow. The most basic of which is His Word. As we’ve already quoted: *“as newborn babes, desire the pure milk of the word, that you may grow thereby...”* There is no other way around it — just as baby needs milk to grow — we need God’s Word. We need to read it... we need to study it... we need to memorize it... to, as it were “inwardly digest it.”

You see, the process of growth is also described as putting off the old and putting on the new ways. In Colossians 3, we are given a list — not a complete list — but a list: *“But now you yourselves are to put off all these: anger, wrath, malice, blasphemy, filthy language out of your mouth. Do not lie to one another, since you have put off the old man with his deeds, and have put on the new man who is renewed in knowledge according to the image of Him who created him, where there is neither Greek nor Jew, circumcised nor uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave nor free, but Christ is all and in all. Therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, put on tender mercies, kindness, humility, meekness, longsuffering; bearing with one another, and forgiving one another, if anyone has a complaint against another; even as Christ forgave you, so you also must do. But above all these things put on love, which is the bond of perfection.”*

These will be the evidences of our Christian growth — putting off the old ways and putting on the new ways. It is a process — a continual process from the time that we become Christians to the time that pass from this earth. A process that we are enabled to progress in because of the Spirit of God.

But we need to study God’s word so that we know **what** we should put off and **what** we should put on... we need to study God’s Word so that we know what He requires. We need to study God’s Word to put off sinful actions and put on actions that are pleasing to God. The Psalmist said: Psalms 119:11: *“Your word I have hidden in my heart, That I might not sin against You!”*

And my friends, just the little that we do on Sunday morning will not be enough... even if we add our study in our Adult Bible class, even if we add our Tuesday Evening Bible study. We need to be personally reading and studying God’s word each and every day. We need to have our own regular time of Bible Study. There are a variety of things that are available for one to do this.

One that I use is called “Tabletalk” from Ligonier Ministries — providing a daily study, along with some excellent articles. And there are others available. See me, if you need help. The point is, that we need read and study God’s Word each if we expect to grow. Just as Rachel would not have grown without milk — so we will not grow without feeding regularly on God’s Word. This is first way.

Other ways that we grow are related to a few of things that we have addressed recently is prayer — it is

absolutely necessary for growth. By prayer we harness the power of the Spirit in order to be able to change... in order to be able to put off the old man and put on the new man. When we take time to pray, we let God know that we are serious about wanting to grow in our faith.

Worship is the other key element in our growth — especially as we gather around the Lord's table and partake of the Lord's Supper. As we focus on Christ and what he has done for us we will grow stronger in our faith — that is why the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper is known as means of grace. Spiritual blessings are ours as we gather for worship and partake of the Lord's Supper. We note that we are feeding on Christ during the supper.

The words that I say tell us this: *The Body of our Lord Jesus Christ, which was given for thee, preserve thy body and soul unto everlasting life. Take and eat this in remembrance that Christ died for thee, and feed on him in thy heart by faith with thanks-giving.*

And then the last prayer: *ALMIGHTY and everliving God, we most heartily thank thee, for that thou dost vouchsafe to feed us, who have duly received these holy Mysteries, with the spiritual food of the most precious Body and Blood of thy Son our Savior Jesus Christ; As we feed on Christ — we grow.*

And then there is Fellowship — the bond that we have with other Christians is also a means of growth. I have to tell you that I am thankful for the way the you all watch out for one another – you call, you check up. This is what it is all about. For Christians this is the way that is to be. We support and encourage one another, because we are family.

As we do this we will grow... as I said, we call it our sanctification. It is something that we are to do. Peter closes his second letter with this command: *“but grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To Him be the glory both now and forever. Amen.”* As we do this we will become more Christlike in our actions and our words.

We read in Romans 8:29 that this is one of the reasons that God has called us. *“For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brethren.”* Think about that — we are to be conformed to the image of Christ. We know that we will never be completely Christlike — but there will be some evidence that we belong to Christ. And that evidence is the fact that as we grow as Christians we will change.

And as we do this, we will be walking as Christians and we will be witnesses to others. There is a powerful witness when someone changes from what they used to do — to someone who does something that is pleasing to God. A powerful witness when someone changes from a lifestyle that is not pleasing to God, to one that does.

The other day I watched Huckabee, and he had Chuck Colson on as guest. You might remember that he was of Nixon's henchmen, who went to prison for his part in Watergate. Since that time he has been an outspoken Christian known world-wide for his prison ministry and other endeavors in the name of Christ.

When my father became a Christian, and he was working for a company whose owner was a Christian, he went to him and told him that he had taken certain liberties with taking things from work. The owner forgave him and told him not to do it anymore, which my father didn't.

We also think of the example of these Christians that Paul is writing to — they were involved in all types of sexual immorality before coming to Christ. But now, since they received Christ as Savior — their witness was that they wouldn't be involved in that type of behavior any longer.

In Ephesians, Paul gives us another example, similar to that which we read in Colossians. We read in Ephesians 4:17 where he tells the Christians not to walk as the Gentiles — that is, the non-Christians — walk. *“This I say, therefore, and testify in the Lord, that you should no longer walk as the rest of the Gentiles walk, in the futility of their mind, having their understanding darkened, being alienated from the life of God, because of the ignorance that is in them, because of the blindness of their heart; who, being past feeling, have given themselves over to lewdness, to work all uncleanness with greediness.”*

Then he tells them what to do — Ephesians 4:20ff: *“But you have not so learned Christ, if indeed you have heard Him and have been taught by Him, as the truth is in Jesus: that you put off, concerning your former conduct, the old man which grows corrupt according to the deceitful lusts, and be renewed in the spirit of your mind, and that you put on the new man which was created according to God, in true righteousness and holiness.... Therefore, putting away lying, “Let each one of you speak truth with his neighbor,” for we are members of one another. Be angry, and do not sin”: do not let the sun go down on your wrath, nor give place to the devil. Let him who stole steal no longer, but rather let him labor, working with his hands what is good, that he may have something to give him who has need. Let no corrupt word proceed out of your mouth, but what is good for necessary edification, that it may impart grace to the hearers. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. Let all bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor, and evil speaking be put away from you, with all malice. And be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, just as God in Christ forgave you.*

With concluding words in Ephesians, chapter 5: 5:1: *Therefore be imitators of God as dear children. And walk in love, as Christ also has loved us and given Himself for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God for a sweet-smelling aroma. But fornication and all uncleanness or covetousness, let it not even be named among you, as is fitting for saints; neither filthiness, nor foolish talking, nor coarse jesting, which are not fitting, but rather giving of thanks.*

Again, we see the putting off... the putting on... the putting off of things that are not pleasing to God... and putting on the things that are. This is our Christian growth... our sanctification. This is what we have been called to do.

As we continue in this Lenten Season, remembering what Christ has done for us — let us also remember one of the reasons that he saved us — to grow in our faith. He accepted us as we were — but now he wants us to grow just like the children in our midst. And we have means to grow at our disposal — let us take advantage of them. If we are not doing these things that are necessary — then begin. If you are — then increase so that there can be increased growth — and pray that God will help you.