

(4) The Who and How of Christian Growth

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Philippians 1:9–11

Philippians 1:9–11 with a special focus on who's involved in Christian growth and how it comes about.

0. Introduction

- We've been studying [Philippians 1](#) for a few months now through the opportunities I've been granted to preach and have seen Paul's deep appreciation for the believers in Philippi who proved to be such a blessing to him as he sat in a Roman prison, reflecting on how faithful they had been to support him since they met.
 - Having first heard about the thankful, joyful affection with which he prayed to God for them we looked *last time* at what it was he prayed.
 - Perhaps you'll remember his prayer from vv. 9–11 where Paul says,

Philippians 1:9–11 ESV

⁹ And it is my prayer that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment, ¹⁰ so that you may approve what is excellent, and so be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, ¹¹ filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God.

- I previously suggested that, if we took that text as a larger unit, we might summarize it by saying that Paul wanted the Philippians to experience growth in rightly ordered affections, for devoted decisions, that led to their spiritual maturity, so that God would be glorified.
 - Paul's desire for the Philippians according to this text was for their love to increase beyond what it already was; with a focus on loving the right things in the right way; in order to make the best possible choices in all things; so they would grow in Christlikeness by God's grace until the day Christ returned; all for God's glory.
- As we looked at vv. 9–10 it became clear to us that, in order to grow in godliness it is necessary for each of us to become *Devoted Decision Makers*.
 - Remember with me the connection Paul made between the Philippians' approval of what was excellent—that which corresponded to what would most please God—and their being pure and blameless for the day of Christ, all of which would be possible as God grew their love with knowledge and all discernment, enabling them to love what God loved and hate what God hated.
 - Hopefully you left our study last time realizing from our text the importance of having our loves/desires/affections ordered in the right way, which leads to the pursuit of that which is best to makes us pure within and blameless without, ready for that day when Christ returns.

- Tonight I'd like to continue our look at vv. 9–11 and examine some more what the whole passage teaches about Christian growth, considering
 - (1) WHO is involved in it; and
 - (2) HOW that growth happens.
 - These are things we need to understand clearly if we would make good progress in our walk with the Lord, and help others do the same. My aim tonight is to either refresh you in them or introduce them to you, depending on where you are in your knowledge of what God is up to in the lives of his people.
- As Paul sought to minister to the Philippians he made clear to them what he wanted to see God do in their lives. His heart longed and laboured for God's change in them so that God would be glorified as they grew.
 - Any problem they faced in the Philippian church—and there were several, when you consider the false teaching and opposition they faced from without, and conflict within—could be walked through in a way that pleased God as they grew in godliness, which is why Paul prayed for them as he did.
 - The same is true for us today as we ourselves learn from this letter. What I want us to see, therefore, is not just what we should be praying for, but who is involved in the process of change and how that change takes place.
- I want us leaving here this evening (1) aware of what the Christian life entails when it comes to God's role and our responsibilities; and (2) fully convinced that we ought to be praying for and pursuing the change God wants for us. This is a message on *The Who and How of Christian Growth*.

1. God's Goal for His People

- As we return to the study on Paul's prayer for the Philippians it will be helpful to keep in mind what God is up to in the lives of his people. What Paul asked for as he prayed only makes sense as we consider the big picture of what God desires for us.
 - How would you explain what he's up to? What is God doing in the lives of his people?
 - Our text in [Philippians 1](#) certainly gives us some clues as it mentions Paul's request of God to make the Philippians' love grow, their decisions become reflective of their devotion to Christ, and their character look more like him.
 - This, of course, all fits with what the rest of the New Testament teaches about God's plan to make his people holy, having first saved them by his grace.
 - When Paul wrote the Thessalonians he let them know as he addressed their sexual immorality,

1 Thessalonians 4:3 ESV

³ For this is the will of God, your sanctification: ...

- He understood that the will of God for his people is their sanctification.
 - Read through the Bible and see that theme woven throughout: God's people saved and set apart to be holy like their God as they bring glory to him.

- From the New Testament we understand the apostles' teaching of a coming day, the day of Christ, on which God's people will be presented "pure and blameless" having experienced inward and outward transformation that would come, even as we'll see tonight, through a saving relationship with God's Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord and Saviour.
- According to verses like [Romans 8:29](#), God's plan for those he saves by his grace is to conform them to the image of his Son, working powerfully in those who were dead in their trespasses and sins (as we read in [Ephesians 2:1](#)) to make them alive in Christ and produce his image in them.
- Each believer is being continually transformed to bear the image of God lost so tragically at the fall, through a process described in [Ephesians 4](#) as requiring the disciple of Christ to remember what he was taught by the Lord to "to put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness" ([Ephesians 4:22-24](#)).
- One of the most basic things you and I had to learn about life as a Christian is the call God places on our lives to put off that which we now realize grieves the Lord, to have our minds renewed, and to put on that which pleases the Lord as we grow to image forth the perfect man, our Lord Jesus.
 - God's agenda for change in the lives of his people—applicable in any and every circumstance we face—is that which now drives our lives as Christians.
- Think about Paul's prayer for the Philippians. Can you see how well it fits with the agenda our God has to make his people holy? Paul's prayer is very much within God's will.

2. WHO is involved in our Christian growth?

- Let's look first at what this prayer reveals about WHO is involved in bringing about our change.
 - How we answer this really is important for understanding how we make progress in the Christian life, and I think a brief discussion on the doctrine of salvation will be helpful.
- We really can't go wrong with starting out by exclaiming with Jonah, "Salvation belongs to the Lord" (cf. [Jonah 2:9](#)). Whether we're referring to the past, present, or future aspects of our salvation that Scripture describes, it's really hard not to conclude that those ancient words uttered from the belly of a big fish really do capture well the work that our God does within us—even if he does intend to make use of our own responsibility along the way.
- **Thinking of the past aspect of our salvation**, most of us are familiar with what Paul says in [Ephesians 2](#) that it is God, because of the great love with which he loves us, who makes each condemned sinner *alive* in Christ. Dead in our trespasses and sins as we are in our natural state, it takes a miraculous work of God's grace to give us new spiritual life and the repentant faith to believe the gospel. Outside of God's work to save us we remain unable and unwilling to love the things of God as we ought, and happily remain children of wrath like the rest of mankind.
 - If you need help seeing that as the Scripture teaches it, study John's gospel or [Ephesians 1-2](#), or [Titus 3](#).

- Scripture teaches that God is the one who saves as he makes us alive, gives us the faith, and moves us to call on Christ. And yes, you and I exercise that faith in obedience to his command to repent and believe, but only after God works graciously by his Spirit to cause us to be born again.
- I'll come back to the present aspect of our salvation in a moment. Thinking for a moment about the future aspect of our salvation (what we hear referred to as our "glorification"), we need to realize there's coming a time at which the Lord will "will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body" ([Philippians 3:21](#)). Whether we're dead or alive at his coming, our bodies will be made to be like his and we'll know the fullness of perfection with sin completely eradicated from body and soul. God is the one who does that.
 - Who then saves sinners? From the perspective of delivering us from the wrath we deserve, declaring us righteous in his sight, cancelling the debt that sin would otherwise require us to pay, and giving us glorified bodies at Jesus' coming, God does.
 - We are capable of bringing nothing to our salvation experience except the sin that makes it necessary. It's God in his grace that saves as he draws us to himself and bids us look to Christ who was condemned in our place, who will also by his great power give us new bodies at his coming.
- But what of the change that God intends to bring before he comes, as we live in the "already but not yet" of our salvation. Who is involved in and responsible for *the present aspect* of it?
 - It's here that our text in [Philippians 1](#) is so helpful.
 - I'd like to suggest as we've heard already that even this aspect of our salvation is of the Lord, though our participation in the process is something he intends to make use of in it.
 - Neglecting the part of either of the two parties will give us a wrong picture of the who's involved and how change happens.
 - By God's design, both God and the believer are involved but only one enables in the present process (what we call "progressive sanctification") by which God's people become more holy in the course of our lives.

2a. God's work

- Notice from our passage what Paul recognizes about Christian growth and who's involved in it. This is a prayer. Who is he praying to? [God.] Why? [Because he knows God is the one to bring Christian growth about.]
 - You'll remember from back in v. 3 and see with me from v. 9 that it's God to whom Paul is praying, asking *him* to grow their love in a particular way.
 - Did he not also, back in v. 6, identify *God* as the one who began a good work in them, who would surely "bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ"?
- This confirms what Scripture teaches elsewhere, doesn't it?: no matter what human contribution might be involved in God's sovereign work among his people, it's *God* who gives the growth as Paul says in [1 Corinthians 3:6](#).

- Further on in Philippians, in 2:12–13; we’ll see Paul’s familiar exhortation for the Philippians to “work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.”
- God is the one at work in his people to initiate and empower the growth we’re responsible to pursue which, by the way, is why we need to be praying, even as Paul prayed, that God would be working in our lives to form in us what he wants us to be.

2b. Our work

- For how important God’s work is here (without it, nothing changes in us!) we do have to acknowledge human responsibility.
 - Note again what we said last time as we looked at vv. 9–10 that *the devoted decisions each believer makes are intended by God to lead to his or her growth in godliness*. Paul was asking for God to change the Philippians such that *they* (the Philippians!) would approve what is excellent and so be pure and blameless for the day of Christ.
 - What’s the point I’m getting at here? *We’re* to work out our own salvation as God works in us; we make a big mistake if we reject *our* part in what God is doing to transform us.
- We’ve seen, then, that God brings about our growth as he grows our loves for the things that please him. We then choose what is best, so [becoming] pure and blameless until Christ returns on which day we’ll experience the completeness of the good work God began in us. On that day we’ll experience the fullness of our maturity with every aspect of our lives conformed to the image of Christ, having been transformed inwardly and outwardly over a lifetime. Then people will be able to see how, according to v. 11, we’ve been **filled with the fruit of righteousness**.
 - **Filled** is a statement marking completeness.
 - What will we have been filled with on that day? According to v. 11, **the fruit of righteousness**. That is, the fruit that comes from living a life of holiness as a result of God’s grace to make us more holy.
 - It’s “the fruit that comes from living righteously” (v. 11, NLT). It’s the beauty of Christ’s character that grows day after day in the life of a believer whose inner purity and outward blamelessness has increased over a lifetime marked by devoted decisions as a result of God’s transforming work to grow his or her love with knowledge and all discernment.
 - At Christ’s return we’ll stand before him fully mature, a completed work, filled with such fruit. *And as we’ve noted already, while we have great responsibility to choose what is best for our growth in obedience to the commands of Scripture to make devoted decisions, note this well—God brings it about. Both he and we are necessarily involved.*

3. HOW does he bring it about?

- I think one of the most fascinating things to think about is how God brings about change in his people. That’s what I’d like us to see next as we move from looking at the WHO of Christian growth, to the HOW.

- In one sense it's a great mystery, captured in some way by what Jesus says about the working of the Spirit in [John 3:8](#) where he says, "The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit." Some things God does are beyond our ability to comprehend, though we see the impact of their working.
- That said, Scripture does provide light for us to understand how Christian growth is brought about, giving insight into what he has given and what we're to embrace as he works, that we might be found participating prayerfully to the fullest extent possible in what he's doing in and through us.
- Note from further along in v. 11 of our text that the growth God brings in his people that leads to our being filled with the fruit of righteousness **comes through Jesus Christ**.

Philippians 1:9-11 ESV

⁹ And it is my prayer that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment, ¹⁰ so that you may approve what is excellent, and so be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, ¹¹ filled with the fruit of righteousness that **comes through Jesus Christ, ...**

- I have loved thinking through this phrase. Meditating on it has given so much opportunity to think about what it means to grow in Christian maturity, **how the Lord is at work through specific means to make us bear his image.**
 - Without minimizing the great mystery behind how God works by his Spirit in the life of his people, we can and should consider the means by which he operates to grow us by his grace.
 - These are things he has graciously given which, when present in our lives, are used by him that we might find ourselves filled with "the fruit that comes from living righteously" when Christ comes back.
 - I would suggest to you based on a study of what the the New Testament says about how Christ brings change in his people, such fruit **comes through Jesus Christ** as we abide in him. That requires submitting to his rule, feeding on his word, walking in his strength, and spending time with his people. A brief survey of these things will help us see and appreciate the abundance of our God's grace toward us to make us what he wants us to be.

3a. Abiding in Christ

- Consider with me first that no godliness comes in our lives unless we abide in Christ. This is what our Lord teaches in [John 15:4-5](#) where he tells us,

John 15:4-5 ESV

⁴ Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. ⁵ 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.

- In the vine analogy he uses, we are the branches that can only bear the fruit of godliness in vital connection to the vine, that is, Christ. Whoever abides in him "bears much fruit." That fruit is the fruit of righteous living that demonstrates us to be his disciples. Unless we abide in him, we won't bear any.

- That requires a person to be united to him through faith, engaged with him in prayer in all aspects of our lives, drawing strength from him as a branch draws strength from its nourishing vine.

3b. Submitting to his rule

- In connection with this spiritual union we must also consider Christ's authority in our lives.
- Where once before we lived for sin and self, now under new ownership we live for him; we the slave, he the master.
- As Paul explains in [2 Corinthians 5:14–15](#);

2 Corinthians 5:14–15 ESV

¹⁴ ... the love of Christ controls us, because we have concluded this: that one has died for all, therefore all have died; ¹⁵ and he died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised.

- Elsewhere he says, “You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body” ([1 Corinthians 6:20](#)). And we've already seen how Paul regarded himself a “servant (slave) of Jesus Christ” alongside Timothy at the beginning of Philippians, reminding us of his own submission to his master as a slave (see [Philippians 1:1](#)).
- Far from being a drudgery, the idea of being a slave of Christ should actually be something we delight in. Scripture reveals Christ's lordship over us is good, righteous, and intended for our flourishing. Listen to the call he makes to those under the miserable oppression of legalistic, man-made religion in

Matthew 11:28–30 ESV

²⁸ Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. ²⁹ Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. ³⁰ For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”

- Did you catch that? Under Jesus' yoke—a symbol of one person being subject to another's authority as an ox is subject to its human master—there is rest. His “yoke is easy, and [his] burden is light.”
- The commanding invitation he gives is one to submit ourselves to him, understanding his gentle, humble authority, under which he charts a new course for our lives to “bear much fruit and so prove to be [his] disciples” ([John 15:8](#)).
- In living for him we're also to learn from him, even as we just read: “Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me” ([Matthew 11: 29](#)).
- [Ephesians 4:20–23](#) reminds us that when we were made new at our conversion we “learned Christ.” We saw this earlier as we thought through God's plan to make his people holy, but it's worth repeating as we think through the fruit that “comes through Jesus Christ.”
- At our salvation we heard about him and were taught in him to put off that which grieves the Lord, to have our minds renewed, and to put on that which pleases him as we grow to put Christ on display. We're no longer to be conformed to this world, but instead “transformed by the renewal of [our minds],

that by testing [we] may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect” ([Romans 12:2](#)).

- “Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me,” says the Lord. We’re to live for and learn from our Lord Jesus.

3d. Feeding on his word

- This is where his word comes into view in our discussion of how the fruit of righteousness comes through Jesus Christ. It’s from his word that we learn how to live for him.
- As we let the word of Christ dwell in us richly ([Colossians 3:16](#)), being careful to hide it in our hearts ([Psalm 119:11](#)), we’re transformed by the renewing of our minds. It’s in the word of God that we learn what we ought to put off and put on, that Christ might be seen in us.
- It’s Scripture that is able to make us wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus, and to teach, reprove (convict), correct, and train us in the way we should go as we seek to bear righteous fruit for him. God’s word is that which we need to guide us ([Psalm 119:105](#)) as we look to the promises and precepts (rules) he has preserved for us.
 - What a blessing to have accessible to us the word of God that revives the soul, makes wise the simple, and rejoices the heart (see [Psalm 19:7-9](#)).
- I think it’s worth noting here that what you and I were engaged in here this morning and what we’re engaged in here tonight is feeding on his word. That, as I hope you’re seeing, is a fundamental aspect of how Christ brings about the fruit of righteous living that Paul refers to in [Philippians 1:11](#): he forms us by his word.
 - We’re sanctified in the truth of God’s word (cf. [John 17:17](#)). By drinking in the “pure spiritual milk” of the word is how we grow up into the fullness of our salvation (see [1 Peter 2:3](#)). The word of God is so clear about how important the word of God is for we as believers to grow in grace, even exhorting us to go from milk to solid food, that which corresponds to greater discernment and godliness (see [Hebrews 4:11-14](#)).
 - Given how important God’s word is in the Lord’s work to mature us, I really am concerned for you and your spiritual growth if you’re not making an effort to drink in God’s word between Sundays.
 - Friends if we’re not abiding in Christ by submitting to his rule and *feeding on his word* how can we expect to be filled with the fruit that comes from righteous living that he intends to bring through our intentional efforts?

3c. Walking in his strength

- Of course, it’s not as though we can just pull up our own bootstraps and become experts in what the Bible says to guarantee our Christian growth.
- We’ve already seen that *God* must work, and we must understand that our ability to follow the direction that comes from his word can only come as he strengthens us in that work. Without him we can do *nothing*.

- Without the illumination of his Spirit, we cannot make sense of his word. Without his Spirit working in us we can't obey it either. It's God who must work in us if we're "to will and to work for his good pleasure" ([Philippians 2:13](#)).
- Later in the letter we'll see that Paul was able to honour the Lord through contentment "through Christ who *strengthened* him" ([Philippians 4:13](#)). How powerless we are to do what we're called to do—to pursue the fruit of righteousness—unless we're prayerfully drawing on the strength he promises to provide by his enabling Spirit.

3e. Spending time with his people

- What we're walking through is a brief survey of how the fruit of righteousness comes through Jesus Christ. I've said that, while the change he brings is marked by mystery, he does use means to bring change about. So far we've seen that this comes as we abide in him, submitting to his rule, feeding on his word, and walking in his strength. I would suggest further that he uses his people to bring about the fruit of righteous living:
 - Pastors and teachers minister the word to us ([Ephesians 4:11-12](#)).
 - Other believers teach and admonish us, even sing truth to us and with us as we gather regularly for fellowship ([Colossians 3:16](#)).
 - We're moved to evaluate the decisions we make as those who love us challenge us to live for the Lord, exhorting us daily that we might not be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin ([Hebrews 3:13](#)). We stir one another to love and good works as we gather with others regularly, eager to point one another to the Lord and his will for our lives.
 - And how often have you and I been encouraged at what the Lord is doing as we celebrate at his communion table and witness baptisms? Even the ordinances the Lord has given to be enjoyed with his people are used in his hands to encourage our grow in godliness—not because they infuse us with some special power, but because of what they move us to remember about his work and how we're to respond.
- How does our God bring about our maturity? How does he bring about the fruit of righteous living? [Philippians 1:11](#) says it comes through Jesus Christ.
 - It comes as we abide in Christ, submitting to his rule, feeding on his word, walking in his strength, and spending time with his people.

4. Conclusion.

- We set out tonight looking at what Paul's prayer for the Philippians reveals about (1) WHO is involved in our Christian growth, and (2) HOW that growth happens.
 - Now we know it involves God's work and our in their proper place, and he uses specific means to bring about change in our lives through Jesus Christ. Next time we'll look at the goal of that growth, which is to bring God glory, but as we close tonight let me challenge you to apply our text in a couple ways based on what we've seen about the WHO and HOW of Christian growth.

- **Firstly**, be praying for God to work in your own life and the lives of those you're walking with to bring about change that only he can bring.
 - Paul saw God as the source and force of the Philippians' sanctification, so he prayed for God to move in them.
 - Note what he prayed about increasing love, growing discernment, and devoted decisions. Ask God to bring those to pass in your life and my life, knowing that that's what he wants for his people.
- **Finally**, think about what we've seen about how the Lord intends to bring about change. He causes us to bear fruit *through Jesus Christ*. That means we must abide in Christ, submit to his rule, feed on his word, walk in his strength, and spend time with his people.
 - Isolating ourselves will hinder our growth. Self-effort won't cut it. Neglecting God's word won't lead greater godliness. Living for self and the things of this world can't lead to the fruit that comes from living a God-ward life.
 - **Given what we've said about *The Who and How of Christian Growth*, what do you need to change today to ensure you're participating in God's plan to grow you?**