

A couple weeks ago, just before the school year ended, I was going through my morning routine preparing to take my son Brendan to school. I make sure he gets breakfast, gets dressed, combs his hair, and I make him a peanut butter and jelly sandwich and put it in his lunchbox.

Just before I head out the door, my youngest son Eli puts on his sad face and says “I want hash browns.” Well, I don’t cook much. A hash brown request at our house requires a trip to McDonald’s. I was sort of hurrying to get out the door, but I looked at Eli’s big brown eyes and said, “I have to take Brendan to school right now, but I’ll come back and bring you a hash brown.”

He looked back quickly and said: “Two hash browns!”

I said, “You got it!”

Well, it turns out later that day, I called my wife to see how she was doing and she said, “I had to drive to McDonald’s this morning because somebody forgot to get their son hash browns!”

You ever have one of those “I-feel-like-a-jerk” moments? Right there. I totally forgot.

I started imaging my son perched up on the window sill watching and waiting for his father to return with this golden fresh hash brown. Watching. Waiting. Only to be forgotten. I’m sure Eli will bring up that event 30 years from now in a therapy session.

Anyway, I bring that incident up because I think it illustrates something that happens in our spiritual lives. We make promises to God and we don’t follow through. We have great intentions, but we get busy, we get distracted, or we forget. In some worst case scenarios, some people in their Christian lives get so frustrated or dissatisfied that you give up or just stop growing.

My one prayer for First Free Church (as you can see on the title slide) is: **God, Make us Grow.**

Now at first glance that might seem to be a selfish prayer asking God to make us grow numerically in to a larger church body that would fill this auditorium for our weekend worship services. And although that would be nice (I am certainly in favor of numerical growth), I want us to increase in number for the right reason.

But when I pray “God, make us grow.” I’m really not talking about numbers, I’m really thinking on an individual level that has nothing to do with numerical increase. It has to do with a person’s heart. The growth I’m praying for a church is an increase in our spiritual desire. My prayer for First Free is that we would become a body of believers that is committed to spiritual growth—increasing our faith. I would love to see our church become known as a place where people at

any level of spiritual development can the resources and opportunities they need to take that next step that will help them to grow and mature in their faith.

And I think this prayer is tune with the heart of God. It's a biblical prayer for us to pray. Look at what the Apostle Paul reminds us of in 1 Corinthians chapter 3...

1 Corinthians 3:7 - *So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow.*

You see, right there in the verse we are told that it is right and proper for us to ask God to make us grow. Why? Because he is in the business of making things grow...

God makes things grow. Paul is explaining to the believers in the ancient city of Corinth that his work as a missionary was to plant a church. His role was to plant the seed of God's Word in the hearts of the people in Corinth, and once the church started another leader named Apollos came along—and his role was to water those seeds. Paul helped them discover God's love by planting the seed of the Gospel—and Apollos watered the seed and built on Paul's foundation.

But Paul's point here is that the most important person in this process is God. Paul can plant, Apollos can water—but the focus is to be on God. Why? Because He is the one that makes things grow!

So it's perfectly good for us to pray this prayer. But here's where the problem starts: even though I believe this is a great prayer to pray, it's just like my promise to bring hash browns to my son—we can pray this prayer with great intentions and never lift a finger to see it through to reality.

You see, the other thing I want you to notice about Paul's words here is who it is that plants and waters first. You see, God is not the only one responsible for spiritual growth. There is a process of preparation that is needed. When it comes to spiritual growth it requires our cooperation with God in order to set the right environment for God to do any growing within us.

In other words: Spiritual growth is not automatic. It's a team effort (you and I) with God. We have a responsibility to be fertile soil for God to grow. You see, the truth is, it is possible to be a Christian and not be growing spiritually. Which therein, lies the problem. I'll put it up on the screen for us.

The problem is: The average Christian is not growing spiritually.

Why is this?

Well, there are more reasons than this, but I can think of three main reasons why Christians don't grow. First reason...

1. They don't care. They have a (lack of motivation). For whatever reason, spiritual growth is not a priority or their just wrapped up in to many other things to get serious about their faith. The second reason Christians aren't growing...

2. They don't know how. These Christians suffer for a (lack of training). Perhaps they've never been properly equipped or disciplined. These Christians aren't growing because the church has not helped them out and provided the tools. The third reason why Christians aren't growing...

3. They get too frustrated with failure. These Christians are dealing with a (lack of confidence). They find that living the Christian life is too difficult and its just easier putting life on cruise control because they just can't seem to get their Christian motor running.

So the average Christian is not growing. If you doubt that assumption, I want you to look at some recent statistics that I think we can relate to and learn from. Willow Creek Community Church recently did a survey of their entire congregation to determine how well they were doing. Willow Creek is a mega-church of about 20,000 in attendance every week. So on the outside, they seem to be doing pretty well. But they wanted to answer some internal questions that were nagging at them. Questions such as:

- Do our church programs really help people grow?
- Are we putting our resources into ministries that genuinely change lives?
- Are we helping people to become more like Christ, or are we just keeping them busy?

These are good questions to ask. Now, the results of this have been published for everyone to see in a report called "Reveal" that you can purchase from our Scroll bookstore in the lobby and read for yourself if you want to. What Bill Hybels and Willow Creek's leadership team found was interesting. First of all, not surprisingly, they found that people identified themselves to be at different levels of spiritual faith. These levels of maturity were catagorized like so:

- **Exploring Christianity**
- **Growing in Christ**
- **Close to Christ**
- **Christ-Centered**

These levels are not surprising because spiritual growth can be compared to physical growth. When you think about how people grow physically: people are at different growth levels. You have babies, children, youth, young adults, and mature adults.

So physically, people are at different levels, that's obvious. But what this chart tells us is that it is no different when it comes to spiritual growth. People are are all different stages of spiritual health and growth as well. That shouldn't surprise us.

But what is somewhat surprising, is what Willow Creek discovered about the people within these categories...

What they found was that many of the people in the “close to Christ” and “Christ-centered” levels were either stalled out spiritually or they were dissatisfied with the church. More than 25% of those in these two categories were struggling spiritually—either they had lost momentum or were unhappy with the worship, preaching or programs of the church.

And what this leads me to conclude:

One of the most common pitfalls for Christians is that they stop growing spiritually and do not fully mature in Christ!

Maybe you can relate to the findings in this survey. I think it’s important to remember that spiritual growth is a “journey” as opposed to a “destination”. What I mean is that none of us can claim to have arrived at perfection this side of heaven. Instead, we need to evaluate where we are at on the path and seek to move further up on the scale to grow in our journey toward Christlike maturity. Which means, we must cultivate a church environment that places a value on equipping and discipling.

George Barna said it this way: *“The worst thing, would be for millions of people to accept Christ as their Savior, and then live the remainder of their life as if nothing had changed other than their eternal destiny. The challenge to faith communities, is to help people realize that you cannot be a follower of Christ by taking the free gift of salvation and then continuing to pursue the same life trajectory as before making that decision. Embracing Christ as your Savior is not the end of the story.”*

Both Willow Creek and Barna have identified one of the growing problems in Christianity. Namely, that there are too many stalled or dissatisfied Christians that are populating our churches. What this creates is a lack of movement and a lack of enthusiasm within the kingdom of God. It’s no wonder many churches are declining and losing their former impact in their communities.

Many churches simply do not think through how they are going to help people mature. And although we cannot make people grow spiritually, we are responsible to help. We do that by planting seeds and watering them (1 Cor. 3:6). If we are faithful to do our part, God is *always* faithful and will do His part to bring about growth!

So to become a healthy equipping church we need to answer the question: **What is our church’s plan for discipleship?** In other words: **How are we leading people to Christ, and how are we helping them grow in Christlike attitudes and behavior?** These are questions that have been close to my heart this past year. As a pastor, my role is to shepherd people. And part of my responsibility as the Pastor of Congregational life is to work with the Discipleship and Evangelism Commission to think through exactly how are equipping our people so that they are growing in their faith and maturing in their walk with Christ.

So understand these issues that Barna and Willow Creek have identified are things that we are wrestling with here at First Free. As leadership, we want to provide an environment that will help people to grow and mature spiritually.

Here's what it means on an individual, personal level—for you and me: I really believe one of the greatest opportunities that we have as a church is for each one of us to commit to personal spiritual progress.

The bottom line is this: You need to ask yourself: **Am I doing more than just showing up and soaking in a sermon? What is it that I need to be or do in order to keep from stalling? How do I keep my spiritual momentum moving forward?**

Those are important evaluation questions for you to ask yourself. Because you know if you're not moving forward in your Christian walk, guess what? There's only two other options: You're either stalled and standing still... Or, you're backsliding. Either way—progress has stopped.

Let me share with you some ideas on how to apply the message to your own life today. Turn your outline over.

These are three practical things that you can (and should) do to help you grow spiritually:

1. Be intentional

Many churches act as though spiritual growth is automatic once a person is born again. They operate with no organized plan for following up with new believers and no comprehensive strategy for developing members to maturity. They leave it all to chance.

They assume that Christians automatically will grow to maturity if they attend church services and somehow through Christian osmosis, the job of discipling a believer to maturity will be done. We think all we need to do is just encourage people to show up at meetings, and that's it.

Obviously, that's not true. Spiritual growth does not just happen once you are saved, even if you attend services regularly. Churches are filled with people who've attended for their entire lives yet are still spiritual infants being spoon-fed week after week. An assimilated member is not the same as a mature member.

For proof of that, I want you to listen to a testimony from one of our long-time members, David Staples. David is one of the regular teachers in our Adult Communities that meet on Sunday mornings. And as David comes up to share, ask yourself if there's anything in his faith story that resonates with you. It may be that you need to be more intentional in your walk with Christ.

David Staples testimony

The truth is that spiritual growth is intentional. It requires a commitment to grow. A person must want to grow, decide to grow and make an effort to grow.

In Philippians 2, the Apostle Paul puts it this way, he says: *Continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose.*

Circle the word “continue” in that verse. For those of you that are stalled out and at a standstill spiritually, you need to follow the advice in that one word of Scripture: “continue” And notice that it says “work out”—not “work on”—your salvation. In other words, there is nothing you can add to what Christ did for your salvation. You don’t have to work to earn your salvation.

When Jesus died on the cross for your sins and mine—he did all the work necessary for you to be saved.

The Apostle Paul is talking about spiritual growth in this passage to people who are already saved. The important thing to note is that God has a part in our growth, but so do we. We must make an intentional effort to grow. Circle those words as well “work out.” For those of you who are health or fitness conscious, you know that a workout involves effort, discipline, time, energy. Same thing in your walk with Christ. It’s a workout. It’s intentional, not accidental. So take initiative. Take that next step.

And let me just say this, it doesn’t matter if you’re 8 years old or 80—there’s always room for spiritual growth in your life. There are always rough edges that need to be smoothed out. There’s always hardness in our heart that God wants to soften. And no one else can initiate spiritual growth for you. You have to do it.

So that’s the first thing that you can (and should) do to help you grow spiritually. Here’s the second thing...

2. Seek instruction

Write the word “instruction” in the blank. Here’s what King Solomon had to say about this:

Proverbs 23:12 – *Apply your heart to instruction and your ears to words of knowledge.*

The note in my Life Application Bible for this verse points out that the world is full of people who think they know everything. They don’t want to be told what to do, and they think it shows weakness to listen or learn from others. But the Bible tells us that we have a lot to learn from the counsel of others if we open our ears and are willing to listen.

You see, if we refuse to learn from others, then we are building a wall of pride that will keep us from growing. It could be a reason why some of our stalled and dissatisfied Christians are the way they are. One of the personal goals I have for my life is to be a lifelong learner. I am constantly learning new things from the books I read, the sermons I hear, a magazine article, a blog I read on the internet.

There’s so much to know out there, and I don’t have to be in school in order to be a student. Being a learner is an attitude. It’s seeking to be constantly instructed. That kind of desire is what will allow God to mature you. That’s my prayer: God, make me grow! It means seeking instruction.

Then apply your heart to instruction and your ears to knowledge. That's number two. The last thing you can (and should) do to grow spiritually is...

3. Get involved

What might this mean for you today? Ask yourself, where is my spiritual life lacking? Maybe you don't understand the Bible very well. What you need to look for is a Bible study to get involved in. Or maybe you feel disconnected and you're lacking Christian friendship. So set a goal to get plugged into a small group or one of our Sunday morning Adult Communities. These are things the church can help you with.

Perhaps your spiritual life is being hindered because you're in a state of crisis or grief. For you, the next step would be to contact Pastor Chuck in our Caring Ministries office. If you had a Stephen Minister walking through this season in your life, that's an intentional step you can take to get your spiritual life moving forward.

I want you to know that our church is working on putting together a discipleship menu before the end of summer. The menu will have on it all of the opportunities available to you to help you to grow and get connected. We want you to be looking for that. But perhaps you are connected and growing but not serving. My encouragement to you is to get involved using your spiritual gifts and passions in ministry within the church.

You know, God formed every creature on this planet with a special area of expertise. Some animals run, some hop, some swim, some crawl, and some fly. Here's a unique animal...

Armadillos are diggers. God created them with sharp claws to dig for food, such as grubs, and to dig dens where they live. The most unique feature of these animals is the armored plates that cover their whole body. These plates are separated by strips of flexible skin but the underside of the animal is not and is simply covered with soft skin and fur. Of course, that's their weak spot, so, for protection against predators, God created these guys with a defense mechanism. Certain species of armadillos can roll themselves up into a ball.

You probably knew that, but did you know that armadillos also have an amazing ability to remain underwater for as long as six minutes. In fact, they can roll themselves like a ball right into a river or lake and because of the density of its armor, an armadillo will sink to the bottom. After time passes and the predator is gone, the armadillo will slowly inflate its stomach with air and it will rise back up to the top and float toward the shore.

God created these creatures with some unique abilities. And he's done the same for you and me.

Each one of us has a particular role to play based on the way they were shaped by God. The same is true with humans. Each of us was uniquely designed, to do certain things.

Before God created you, he decided what role he wanted you to play on earth. He planned exactly how he wanted you to serve him, and then he shaped you for those tasks. You are the way you are because you were made for a specific ministry.

The Bible says, *For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.* Our English word "poem" comes from this Greek word translated "workmanship." You are God's hand-crafted work of art. You are not an assembly-line product, mass-produced without thought. You are a custom designed, one-of-a-kind, original masterpiece.

God deliberately shaped and formed you to serve him in a way that makes your ministry unique. So get involved in serving God. Listen for inner promptings that can point to the ministry God intends for you to have.

This is not rocket science. It's not hard to determine what you need to grow spiritually. Being intentional simply means looking where you want to go and making a plan for how to get there.

Seeking instruction means becoming a lifelong learner and continuing to work-out your spiritual muscles so that you're not getting fat, flabby or lazy as a Christian.

And getting involved will help you grow because God will be doing through you what He's intended you to be doing all along.

So evaluate how you're doing spiritually. Eugene Peterson embellishes a bit here, but his The Message version of 2 Corinthians 13:5 really lays it out straight:

"Test yourselves to make sure you are solid in the faith. Don't drift along taking everything for granted. Give yourselves regular checkups. You need firsthand evidence, not mere hearsay, that Jesus Christ is in you. Test it out. If you fail the test, do something about it."

Here's some questions you can ask about your daily or weekly routines that will help you move forward spiritually.

When it comes to any kind of activity or event in your life, evaluate yourself using questions like this:

1. Does this strengthen me or weaken me?
2. Is it good for my body?
3. Is it good for my mind?
4. Will it draw me closer to God?
5. Is it a waste of time or money?

Use these questions to identify the things in your life that are stalling or weakening your spiritual momentum. Make a decision right now to turn from those areas of compromise. Pray that God will help to guard your life from things that weaken your spiritual momentum. Ask Him to give you wisdom to make choices that will keep you from "stalling" spiritually.

I hope you're not satisfied staying at your current level of spirituality in any area of my life (work life, relationship with God, leadership ability, etc.). I want to constantly go to the next

level in everything that I do. That's what my One Prayer challenges all of us to do: "God, make us grow."

Closing Prayer