

Luke Chapter 13vs6-9 “Then he told this parable: ‘A man had a fig-tree, planted in his vineyard, and he went to look for fruit on it, but did not find any. So he said to the man who took care of the vineyard, ‘For three years now I’ve been coming to look for fruit on this fig tree and haven’t found any. Cut it down! Why should it use up the soil?’

“ ‘Sir,’ the man replied, leave it alone for one more year, and I’ll dig round it and fertilise it. If it bears fruit next year, fine! If not then cut it down.’”

Mark 11vs12-14 and 20-21 “The next day as they were leaving Bethany, Jesus was hungry. Seeing in the distance a fig tree in leaf, he went to find out if it had any fruit. When “The next day as they were leaving Bethany, Jesus was hungry. Seeing in the distance a fig tree in leaf, he went to find out if it had any fruit. When he reached it, he found nothing but leaves, because it was not the season for figs. Then he said to the tree, “May no one ever eat fruit from you again.” And his disciples heard him say it. (vs20) In the morning, as they went along, they saw the fig tree withered from the roots. Peter remembered and said to Jesus, “Rabbi, look! The fig tree you cursed has withered!”

Both these passages show God’s view on the necessity of us bearing/growing fruit. When we become Christians God expects us to grow. The first passage shows God’s expectancy of growth and the second shows his frustration due to lack of growth.

The second passage is interesting in many ways and through it we can learn various things about God’s will for us in Christ Jesus. Firstly what immediately strikes me as interesting is why Jesus cursed the tree for having no fruit in a season when it was not supposed to have fruit

Some light is shed on this passage by an article in Hard Sayings of the Bible by F. F. Bruce:

"The Barren Fig Tree" published many years ago by W. M. Christie, a Church of Scotland minister in Palestine under the British mandatory regime. He pointed out first the time of year at which the incident is said to have occurred (if, as is probable, Jesus was crucified on April 6th, A.D. 30, the incident occurred during the first days of April). "Now," wrote Christie, "the facts connected with the fig tree are these. Toward the end of March the leaves begin to appear, and in about a week the foliage coating is complete. Coincident with [this], and sometimes even before, there appears quite a crop of small knobs, not the real figs, but a kind of early forerunner. They grown to the size of green almonds, in which condition they are eaten by peasants and others when hungry. When they come to their own indefinite maturity they drop off." These precursors of the true fig are called *taqsh* in Palestinian Arabic. Their appearance is a harbinger of the fully formed appearance of the true fig some six weeks later. So, as Mark says, the time for figs had not yet come. But if the leaves appear without any *taqsh*, that is a sign that there will be no figs. Since Jesus found "nothing but leaves" - leaves without any *taqsh*- he knew that "it was an absolutely hopeless, fruitless fig tree" and said as much. (www.rationalchristianity.com)

So putting it simply, this article says that during the time that Jesus cursed that fig tree which was around spring time, the fig tree at times produces small knobs which indicate the future appearance of figs, but since those small knobs weren’t even there, then there was no hope of figs appearing in the future, therefore Jesus cursed the tree and it withered. Although this is logical speculation, if true it shows that Jesus cursed the tree because it showed no SIGNS of growth. From this I realise that when we are born again God expects growth, and wants to see some signs of us growing.

Another verse that grabbed me in relation to this passage is Paul when he said “**Be ready in season and out of season**” (2Timothy 4vs2). Although Paul was specifically speaking about evangelism, we can also apply it to our spiritual growth, we need to be READY to take the steps to allow God to grow us – less we be like the fruitless fig tree and thus displeasing to God. As soon as we’re born again growth is the next step.

So what are we supposed to grow? The answer to that is in everything good. Everything that is good comes from the Lord and if we have been given these good things God expects them to grow. 2Corinthians 8vs7 says, “**But just as you excel in everything – in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in complete earnestness and in your love for us – see that you also excel in this grace of giving.**” As born again Christians we are expected to grow more and more like Christ, the characteristics of Jesus should grow and show forth in our lives. The fruits of the Spirit exemplify the characteristics of Jesus, Galatians 5vs22-23 “**But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self control**”.

My dictionary defines growth as ‘progressive development, an increase or expansion’. I view growth as a constant change for the better. I like the way Paul puts it in 2Corinthians 2vs14, he says “But thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumphal procession in Christ...” Praise God! The Christian life should ALWAYS be one of TRIUMPHAL PROCESSION, but many Christians walk instead in defeated digression and thus are out of the will of God.

There are various reasons why I felt to speak about growth. One being that I’ve seen many Christians that are like those that Jesus speaks of in the Parable of the Sower in Matthew 13vs18-23 “**listen then to what the parable of the sower means: When anyone hears the message about the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what was sown in his heart. This is the seed so along the path. The one who received the seed that fell on rocky places is the man who hears the word and at once receives it with joy. But since he has no root, he lasts only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, he quickly falls away. The one who received the seed that fell among the thorns is the man who hears the word, but the worries of this life and deceitfulness of wealth choke it, making it unfruitful. But the one who received the seed that fell on the soil is the man who hears the word and understands it. He produces a crop yielding a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown.**”

I see too many Christians, even some of my friends who get excited and are zealous and passionate for the Lord, but over a period of time they ‘fall away’. We may say to ourselves that we haven’t fallen away because we are still ‘Christians’, but what happened to the joy you first had, the zeal and passion you had for Christ? Have they grown or have they quickly fallen away like Jesus said of those sown on the rocky places?

A while back I was speaking to one of my friends in secondary school. Him and me always used to talk about God to one another and he was one of my few Christian friends at school. When we parted to our different colleges he phoned me and explained how my departure to a different college from his had an adverse affect on his spiritual walk. I believe he thought that I would feel puffed up by his compliments on my positive impact on his Christian life in the past. Instead however I was disappointed firstly that he had backslidden to a surprising extent and secondly because I realised late that my friend was not rooted in Christ for himself, otherwise he would have grown instead of back slid.

This is one reason why growth is such an important subject; because too many people are experiencing stunted growth, which eventually leads to a decline in your walk with Jesus.

Another reason why growth is an important issue is because many Christians carry the wrong attitude towards their Christianity. Many Christians a while after they’ve been saved carry an attitude of “I’m saved, now what?” They feel purposeless in their Christianity. It’s as if to them that the event of salvation has passed so they can now chill, relax, do what they want and wait for heaven. What they don’t seem to realise is that salvation is a process. Even though we are saved, the Bible also states in 1Corinthians 1vs18 and 2vs15 that we are ‘being saved’. The word ‘being’ insinuates that it’s an ongoing process. Therefore referring back to Paul’s statement Christians seem to forget that they should be saved in triumphant procession. Therefore the subject of growth is vital because we ought to realise that if we’re not growing in Christ we’re actually falling for the devil.

Although we've touched on it a little, let's now talk on why we should grow. Whilst considering this question, I saw 3 main reasons why we should all grow. When thinking about the question it may seem like a stupid question because of course growth is always good. A parent expects a child to grow. It is our nature to grow. Be it physically, business wise, in knowledge etc. Therefore growth being the obvious option, why do I pose this question of 'why should we grow?' This is simply because although growth seems to be an obvious requirement, many Christians act as if they don't know that they are supposed to grow.

The first reason why we should grow is because God commands it. As we've already seen, Jesus takes an intolerant stance against lack of fruit bearing. To God growth is necessary and expected. The first commandment in the Bible can be found in Genesis 1vs28. Be fruitful and multiply. Moreover, going back to the parable of the sower, we see that the seed that fell on good soil "produced a crop – thirty sixty or even a hundred times what was sown". God therefore demands growth and therefore anything contrary to this is sin. Lack of growth is sin. Too many 'bored' Christians are living in sin.

The second main reason I saw making it good for us to grow is the fact that many Christians have a desire to be closer to God, they want to have more of God and have the power of God in their life. But to experience all this and more of the joy of the Lord it is mandatory that we grow. We grow in understanding, wisdom, and knowledge. Ephesians 4:18 says, "**They are darkened in their understanding and separated from the life of God**". Here we see that lack of understanding separates us from God. Applying this vice versa more understanding of God will bring us closer to God. God is complex. What are you doing to understand him more? The Bible says in Ephesians 5vs10 "**Find out what pleases the Lord.**" You would agree that the bigger the cup the more water it can take, the more you grow the more of Jesus you can have. You may hear other mature Christians speaking about the great joy they have in Jesus and you may just be their privately thinking 'I ain't experienced what they're experiencing'. That's because your cup is not big enough, not because you don't have the same thing that they have, **YOU BOTH HAVE JESUS**, only one has grown more and thus can be trusted with more. Too many Christians remain in their comfort zone, remaining as babies. Just staying still in their Christianity. Couch potatoes. Staying still is dangerous. Think about it if you're staying still it is so much easier to be caught and 'easily entangled by sin'. Instead we should always be moving, the Bible calls us to run, it says in Hebrew 12vs1 "**Let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us**". Therefore as a Christian with a born again spirit we yearn for growth but frustrate ourselves by not taking the necessary steps to grow. By not feeding their Spirit, it's as if Christians deliberately frustrate themselves and that's why many Christians live seemingly purposeless Christian lives. True Christians want more of Jesus; more of Jesus requires growth in your spiritual walk, which consequently leads to walking in triumphal procession.

Another reason that we should grow in our walk in Christ is because that is the only way we can be influential in our walk. You can never affect anyone unless Christ has affected you. Many Christians want to see the life of their friends changed, and many at times put their will power and effort in preaching to their friends and baffled at why nothing is happening. Perhaps it's because God wants to work on you first. God wants to work in you before he works through you.

Jesus said that we should take the plank out of our own eye before taking the speck out of our brother's eye. This is a clear indication that God wants to work on you before he allows you to work on others.

The Bible also tells us that Jesus grew in Wisdom and stature. Luke 2vs40 says "**And the child grew and became strong; he was filled with wisdom, and the grace of God was upon him.**" vs52 "**And Jesus grew in wisdom and stature and in favour with God and men**". Jesus shook and transformed the earth in 3 years, before that he was growing. Even Jesus LEARNED obedience through his sufferings. There is an ongoing process in our Christian life, which will influence and benefit others.

If you're not growing, you are harming the body of Christ. God has made all of our purposes interlinked. Thus my lack of growth may lead to your lack of growth. God for instance may want to grow my biblical knowledge, if I don't cooperate with God's will I miss

out the opportunity to benefit myself but also to impart the knowledge to others so they also can grow. Lack of growth has a knock on effect.

Another example of growth before influence is David. He killed a bear and a lion before he killed Goliath and became King over Israel.

It's easy to speak the word. But when you speak it and your life corresponds because of God's working in you, it becomes all the more powerful and life changing to those around you.

So we've seen why we should grow: it is God's command, it is good for us individually and it is good for others.

How then can we grow? The answer is clear in the Bible. God does the growing. Paul said in 1st Corinthians 3vs6 **"I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow"**. God does the growing. This doesn't mean however, that we can sit back relax and do nothing, if so you'll quickly find yourself entangled by the devil. Even though God does the growing, it is also necessary that we take some action. The Bible makes this clear. Ephesians 4vs14-16 shows that we have a clear role to play. **"Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming. Instead speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ. From the whole body joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work."** Here we see that we are supposed to grow up in 'ALL things'. Secondly we see that each part grows and builds ITSELF up. Finally we see that each part has its OWN WORK. So although God does the growing we have work to do to allow God to finish his growth work on us. Like Paul said, "I planted the seed and Appolos watered it..." they DID something before God did his part of growing. So although God does all the growing we play an integral role in ALLOWING God to do his work.

It can be likened to a Husband and Wife. The man (most of the time) pays for the ring, gets down one knee and lets loose in asking the wife to Marry him, in that sense he has done all the work of proposing, nevertheless for the overall goal of marriage to be fulfilled the woman has to say YES; she has to be willing to marry him. Similarly, as soon as we're born against God has the intention to grow us we must SHOW him we're willing.

We must show God our desire. We can learn from Peter, he showed his desire to Jesus to walk on water and so he did. Jesus walked on water and so did Peter, simply because he showed Jesus his desire. Although he started to sink and things started to go wrong we can still learn from his second reaction "Lord save men!" Some Christians don't actually go back to God when things go wrong. We need to go to God in everything.

So growth comes from expressing our desire to God, to grow. Growth must be a deliberate act of will a deliberate and cooperative response to God's will.

To grow we must read our Bible. In fact we need to be engulfed by it. I realised that people say 'aah, I try but sometimes it gets boring, a little bit tedious'. I've never quite understood that. But now I know: those who find the Bible boring are those who don't actually put it into practise. James 1vs22 says, **"Don't just merely read the word, do what it says"**. We need to deliberately go out in the day in doing what the Bible says. That way your faith will be living and active. James also said **"faith without deeds is dead"**. We must be active in our faith. Those who aren't active Jesus called lukewarm. So one way of growing is by putting the word into practise.

To grow we must pray. Some people seem afraid to pray, or become someone else when they pray. There's nothing to be afraid of - be real with God. One thing that I like about myself is that I'm real with God. All of my weaknesses I ask God to help me with. As we've seen earlier the Bible says growing in all things, therefore we need to correspondingly pray about all things. Ephesians 6vs18 says **"Pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests"**. We need to ask God to help us in all situations. We know where we need help. All of my weaknesses that I might not admit to people, I always do to God. And he helps me. Too many Christians don't grow because they don't pray. For example, if you're reading the Bible and you recognise that you're not a patient person, why not pray for

patience. Lack of growth stems too much from Christians thinking prayer is a monologue rather than a dialogue. For instance, we may pray for something and may not receive it, thus you stop praying for it because you assume that God doesn't want to give it to you. The chances are that if you actually ask God why you haven't received your prayer he will reveal to you something hindering the answer or something you need to do, consequently you grow in your knowledge of God's will and draw closer to him.

Thirdly, we must recognise the importance of fellowship with other Christians for our growth. We need to know that as much as Christ loves you as an individual and died for you, he also died for the church as a whole and as a body we need to grow together. Ephesians 4vs12-13 **"To prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ."** You can't grow by yourself. You need other people sometimes. And if you don't like fellowshipping with Christians then pray that God causes you to fall in love with it! The Bible shows us in the book of Acts that as the disciples increased in unity, God added to their number.

Finally to grow we must be constantly aware of God's work in us and also the devils work against us. We must be aware that God wants us to be more and more like him. With this firmly in mind, our attitude towards hard times will be different. For instance, God may want you to grow in patience so may constantly bring annoying people around you, or he may want to grow your humility, so situations testing your pride may increase. By seeing God's loving kindness in wanting to grow you to be more like Him, you will then be able to persevere and 'endure hardship' knowing that your undergoing triumphal procession. There is no triumph without a battle. Thus we should see hardships as an opportunity to grow.

Hebrews 12vs11 **"No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it."** Hard times are bound to come, times when you're not really excited about anything may come. Those are the most important times, where perseverance and discipline is necessary. In those times will you persevere in seeking God's face? Will you discipline yourself to make time for God?

So let us remember that God wants us to grow. The devil knows this and will try to make you feel satisfied with your current position but like 2Corinthians 2vs11 says, **"...we are not unaware of his schemes"**. That was Paul. What about us? Are we passive in our Christianity?

Our Spiritual growth can be measured by the extent of our love. The more Christlike we become, the more loving we are. 'God is love', 'the fruit of the spirit is love...' the greatest commandment is love God and love your neighbour. Throughout my walk with Christ I've realised that my growth has resulted in an increase in love for God and people. How much do I love? Is a good question to ask ourselves.

Therefore, as we've seen, growth is a requirement from God and lack of growth is a sin. Although God does the growing, we must take active steps to show him that we're willing. I once heard a preacher say (on the Internet I think) that 'we're as close to God as we want to be'. When I first heard that I disagreed with it because I felt that I wanted to be closer to God than I was at the time, but now I realise the truth of that preachers statement. I understand that our closeness to God was in our own hands; we have to make certain decisions. The Bible says in James 4vs8 **"Come near to God and he will come near to you"**. So whether we want to move closer to God depends on us. It really just depends how hungry we are?

The hunger of a baby is what's keeping it alive (so long as there's food to feed him) because it desires to eat and therefore the food gives him the nutrients to grow. How hungry are we for God? If we realise that we're not hungry enough lets pray for hunger. In Jesus Name. Amen.