

STUDY EIGHT: MANAGING PERSONAL GROWTH

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A. REMEMBER WHAT YOU HAVE LEARNED ALREADY

To maximize this study you need to have also looked at the studies provided on this site in Setting Biblical Foundations (</living-for-jesus/setting-biblical-foundations.html>), Knowing Yourself (</living-for-jesus/knowning-yourself.html>), and the other studies in Managing Yourself (</living-for-jesus/managing-yourself.html>).

All of these, particularly your principles and priorities, will help you to see evidence of spiritual growth, spiritual stagnation, or spiritual regression.

B. MONITORING YOUR PERSONAL SPIRITUAL GROWTH

What is 'spiritual growth'? Simply, it is becoming more like Jesus. It is a work that the Spirit of God does within us, the children of God, as through the Word of God he teaches us about the Son of God, and transforms us into the image of God. This is a gradual, on-going process that will be complete only when we see Jesus face to face either beyond death or at his return.

B.1 The role of a spiritual mentor or advisor

The concept of having a mentor was mentioned in the previous session. There is no biblical command that people should have 'mentors'. There is also confusion/disagreement about whether or not there is a distinction between 'disciplining' and 'mentoring'. Both words are relatively modern inventions. Questions about whether or not they are limited to one-on-one, rather than group settings, are also raised. Irrespective of these unclear areas, there is, however, a biblical principle of those who are mature in the faith instructing and guiding those who are newer in the faith.

Complete Section #1 in the Study Eight Worksheet (</living-for-jesus/managing-yourself/1240-study-eight-worksheet.html>) now.

Some of these New Testament mentor/learner situations were very brief, specific only to a one-off situation; others were long term. There is no hard-and-fast biblical model to follow. You may choose not to have a mentor with whom you meet at pre-determined regular intervals; but, because you are human and fallible and vulnerable to 'down' times and times of uncertainty, it is the way of wisdom to have one or two people spiritually mature people whom you trust and respect, and whom you can call upon in times of need and times of critical decision. God has placed wise and gifted people in his church for the benefit of the whole church, including those in ministry teams and ministry leadership. He does not expect any of us to be self-sufficient or omni-competent.

B.2 The role and the dangers of self-analysis and self-assessment

There is much in contemporary Christianity that encourages a form of self-analysis and self-assessment that is nothing more than self-centred introspection and is both dangerous and destructive. This unhealthy and actually ungodly self-focus has two significant and opposing results:

[1] It can result in such negative things as guilt, self-blame, self-negation, low self-esteem, insecurity, inferiority, and the like. All of these states of mind have no place in people who are saved by God's grace, clothed in the righteousness of Christ, and recipients of every spiritual blessing in Christ. They are mindsets and attitudes that are completely contrary to all that God has done for us in Christ, and although having an external and superficial appearance of humility are nothing other than the back side of self-centred pride. The whole focus is on self, with Christ and his cross effectively out of the picture. The person who goes down this track is on the road to self-destruction.

[2] It can result in equally negative things as pride, boasting, self-righteousness, superiority, feelings of self-achievement, self-sufficiency and of having 'made the grade'. Again, these attitudes have no place in those who are saved by sheer grace, and whose acceptance in the presence of God has nothing to do with their personal spirituality. Again the whole focus is on self, and Christ and his cross are right out of the picture. The person who goes down this track is also on the road to self-destruction, but, more obviously, also on the way to destroying others.

Self-analysis and self-assessment have the terrible power to take us away from grace and into the dangerous territory of legalism, where our relationship with God is held to be dependent on our performance. It is against this performance-based relationship with God that a large portion of the New Testament is written. If we go down this track we end up in the same dark hole in which all cults and religions of men hold their devotees captive. It was from this pit that Christ died to redeem us.

We need to ask the question: ***Is there a Biblical model of self-analysis/self-assessment?*** Is this something we are supposed to do, and if so, how are we supposed to do it in a way that does not destroy the work of Christ and undermine the salvation he paid so dearly to gain for us?

Complete Section #2 in the Study Eight Worksheet ([/living-for-jesus/managing-yourself/1240-study-eight-worksheet.html](#)) now.

Every time we read the Scripture God challenges us, calling us out of our sin and into his glory. Every time we read the Scripture there is the potential for biblical self-analysis and self-assessment. God himself, by his Word and his Spirit, is our ultimate Mentor. ***Grounding us in the complete and guaranteed salvation we have in Christ, and affirming to us his inalienable love and mercy, God calls us away from our sins and our self-focus and towards himself.*** Not to condemn or reject or to generate guilt or fear, but to draw us on and build us up to be the people he created us to be.

This analysis and assessment assumes that we are the children of God's love, overwhelmed by the 'wow' factor of both who he is and what he has done for us, and who, in the presence of this Almighty God who loves us so much, have no desire but to be the very best that we can be for him. This is not 'to pay him back' for all that he has done, but is the expression of love that is generated by his love, the expression of obedience that is generated by his sheer majesty and holiness. Overwhelmed by his love we desire nothing more than to love him in return, and to express that love by obeying his commands.

Complete Section #3 in the Study Eight Worksheet ([/living-for-jesus/managing-yourself/1240-study-eight-worksheet.html](#)) now.

B.3 Looking after yourself

There is a biblically commanded spiritual self-care that is essential for Christians, and particularly for those involved in Christian service.

Complete Section #4 in the Study Eight Worksheet ([/living-for-jesus/managing-yourself/1240-study-eight-worksheet.html](#)) now.

Much of what we have learned in previous sessions is focused on looking after ourselves – with a view to maximizing our service for the Master. People involved in Christian ministry are human, facing the same struggles as everyone else, plus other struggles and temptations specific to those who serve. People in positions of ministry within the church feel the pressure to be preoccupied with power, passion, their 'pocket book', prestige, perceived performance and pleasing people. These are the things that have wrecked the lives and the ministry of many of the Lord's servants. We are not infallible. The warnings above to look after ourselves are very necessary.

B.4 The question of accountability

Within contemporary Christianity the concept of accountability is frequently encouraged. Quite apart from having a spiritual 'mentor' who is more mature in the faith, Christians are encouraged to have an accountability relationship with an individual or group of other Christians, who mutually hold each other accountable.

In many cults, and in cult-like branches of the church, accountability is enforced to legalistic and spiritually and emotionally dangerous and devastating extremes, where every decision and every sin has to be laid before the person or group to whom one is accountable. In these systems individual personal spirituality is truncated and no personal spiritual muscle is developed. Debilitating introspection, guilt and dependency hinder real spiritual growth. [This destructive accountability is commonly practised under the euphemism of 'discipling' or 'shepherding'.]

Biblically, we are **accountable to** God, and to those whom he has placed in authority over us.

Biblically, we are **responsible for** the well-being of our fellow believers.

Biblically, there are **no** instructions to set up accountability relationships.

Biblically, there **are** instructions to look after each other.

If you do choose to include an accountability relationship in monitoring and programming your spiritual growth, put a hedge around it so that its potential to become unbiblical is minimized. Periodically ask:

Is the person/group to whom I am accountable usurping the place God should have in my life?

Am I more inclined to obey *them* than I am to obey *God*?

Do I 'confess' to them things I haven't confessed to God?

Am I more motivated by the thought of *their disapproval* than I am of *God's grief*?

Am I becoming dependent on their insights rather than seeking out the commands of God from the Word for myself?

Do I feel guilty in their presence?

If I was suddenly cut off from them, would I be like a lame man who lost his crutches?

Do I get a perverse glory from sharing my sin with them?

Do they glory in my sin? Or in being able to point out my sin?

Is this the *best* person [or group] to be accountable to, or is he/she actually holding me back?

Is confidentially being maintained?

Ideally, as believers we should all be proactively helping one another, bearing one another's burdens, helping younger believers walk in the ways of the Lord [Galatians 6:1-3; Titus 2:4-5]. As an individual Christian we should not *have* to seek out someone to help and encourage us – our fellow believers should already be doing that. But this does not always happen, and *there are seasons in some Christians' lives when an accountability relationship is the way of wisdom*. [Note that a strong and trusting friendship can fill the same role.] There are times of specific vulnerability or of pressure which becomes too great to bear alone, and in which the strength of another is needed, if one is to survive and not fall. These times include periods of sexual temptations, struggling with an addiction, long-term ministry overload, a specific intense ministry period, critical decision making, working through difficult issues [one's own, or a counselee's].

C. KEY ELEMENTS IN A PERSONAL PROGRAM OF SPIRITUAL GROWTH

C.1 Have a Bible reading plan

See this study (</how-to/study-the-bible.html>).

You will grow spiritually only as your knowledge of God and of salvation grows, and this only happens as we learn from his Word. You will know the mind of God only as you study his Word. Your heart will grow more like God's heart, only as you learn about his love and compassion from his Word. You will grow in obedience to God only as you learn his commands from the scriptures.

C.2 Engage in personal prayer

The biblical perception of prayer can be condensed to ten points:

Prayer is the believer's communion with the Lord.

Prayer is a regular practice of those who trust in the Lord.

Prayer is concerned with the glory of God.

Prayer is concerned with the well-being of believers and/or the church.

Prayer is an expression of deep struggle, concern or agony.

Prayer is seeking strength in situations of temptation or pressure

Prayer is acknowledgement of sin and sinfulness ['confession'] and a dependence on the mercy and forgiveness of God.

Prayer depends on God's help in ministry and for his sovereign work in the conversion of sinners.

Prayer is part of serving the Lord

Prayer is a ministry to others

When we look at the Lord's Prayer we find:

Three God-focused concerns

The honour of his name

The coming of his kingdom

The doing of his will

Three Christian-community focused concerns

- Our physical needs
- Our spiritual need for forgiveness
- Our spiritual need for protection and deliverance from temptation and evil.

From all of the above we can identify three key features of prayer:

- Prayer is an expression of God-centeredness
- Prayer is an expression of personal dependence upon God
- Prayer is concerned with the well-being of others.

C.2.1 What should we do in our prayer times?

Prayer is not just asking God for things, even spiritual things.

Times of communion with God should include: worship, praise, thanksgiving, acknowledgement of one's own weakness and sinfulness, repentance, expressions of faith and trust, expressions of commitment and dedication, supplication concerning one's own needs or despair, intercession on behalf of others, expressions of confidence.

One common, but limited, way of condensing this is the acronym ACTS – Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, Supplication.

After God and his kingdom, what should be included on our prayer list? This varies from person to person and situation to situation. Suggestions are:

- Family members
- Spiritual needs
- Physical needs
- Family situations
- Work
- School
- Ministries
- Relationships
- Yourself
- Your physical needs
- Your spiritual needs
- Your service for the Lord

- Church family
- Leadership [pastors and elders]
- Your ministry team
- Your home group
- Congregation
- Present difficulties

- Missions and missionaries

- Governments and world situations
- Your country and its governments
- World leaders
- Crises overseas

C.3 Have goals for reading significant Christian books. John Piper points out that if you commit to read for 20 minutes every day you can read fifteen 250 page books every year. Most of us spend more than 20 minutes watching the TV news! Some of us spend 20 minutes in the shower, or getting dressed, or applying make-up. It isn't really very long. We could probably all spend three times that much, and read 45 books every year!

Good books increase our understanding of the Word, and, thereby, our knowledge and trust in God.

C.4 Attend corporate worship and Bible study

Hebrews 10:25 says: *'Let us not give up meeting together as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another ...'*

A fairly commonly heard statement is: 'You can be a Christian and not go to church.'

At one level it is right. You can be a Christian without going to church. A person is not a Christian because they attend, or are a member of, an organized church, whether that 'church' is a formal gathering in a church building, or small home-based group. A Christian is essentially a person who has acknowledged Jesus Christ as their Lord and, having done so, trusts him as their Saviour [Romans 10:9; John 3:36; 5:24; 8:24; 1John 5:11]. It is as simple and as definitive as that.

But to acknowledge Jesus Christ as Lord is far more than a verbal affirmation. As the Bible repeatedly points out, the genuineness of the verbal affirmation is proved or disproved by the subsequent life of the person who claims to have this faith in Christ [John 8:31; James 2:26]. This life, by which a person is proved genuine or false in their belief claims, is not a life lived in isolation from people but a life lived out in relationship with people, and, specifically, in relationship with others who profess faith in Christ [John 13:34,35; 14:15; 15:9-12; Ephesians 4:32-5:2; 1John 2:7-11].

Those who claim Christ as their Lord demonstrate their knowledge of Christ and salvation, and their love of Christ, by loving 'one another'. These verses specifically refer to others who are our fellow believers. They are people who are members of the same spiritual family, adopted by God as his children, redeemed by the death of Christ. To obey this command to love and to show compassion to other believers is only possible if we are in continuing relationship with other believers.

Further, the Bible speaks of Christians in corporate or composite terms: together Christians form the 'body' of Christ, together Christians are being built into a 'building', together Christians are the 'temple' of God [Ephesians 2:12-21]. God gives individual Christians various gifts, not for themselves, but in order that the 'church' – Christ's 'body', can be built up and grow towards maturity in faith, in knowledge, so that individually and corporately, Christians will not be easy prey for false teachers [Ephesians 4:7-16]. If we fail to meet together with others we are leaving ourselves without this provision of God for our protection and our growth towards maturity in faith and knowledge.

Similarly, the Scripture teaches that God makes his wisdom known to 'rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms' through the 'church' [Ephesians 3:10]. When Satan and his demons, and the good angels, cherubim and seraphim, see the church they see the wisdom of God. Why so? Because this body of people saved by grace is a body comprising a broad spectrum of people – in Biblical terms male, female, slave, free, Jew, Greek, circumcised, uncircumcised – people who in the normal way of things are divided or even hostile; and yet, here in the church, they are one [Galatians 3:26-28; Ephesians 2:14; 3:2-13; Colossians 3:11-14]. This intention of God to demonstrate his wisdom to the heavenly beings can only be achieved as we come together as a church community. God is also glorified 'in the church' through all generations [Ephesians 3:21]. If we do not fellowship with other believers we short-circuit these stated intentions of God.

These are just three of the conceptual reasons why Christians should meet with other Christians. In addition to other conceptual reasons, there is also that straight command: 'Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing' [Hebrews 10:25]. This command was originally given to Christians who were so pressured by persecution that they were on the brink of reverting to their former Judaism. It was physically dangerous to meet together. Yet the very thing that was so dangerous was the thing that would strengthen them to remain firm in their faith in Christ. The writer adds to the above 'but let us encourage one another – and all the more as you see the Day approaching.' When it's tough and dangerous to be a Christian it is the encouragement of other Christians that will keep us faithful.

Our presence in the corporate gatherings of the church, whether small or large, is not only a testimony to God and an opportunity to worship God and learn from his Word, it is also a source of mutual encouragement. Our presence encourages others. Their presence encourages us. This is our privilege. This is our responsibility.