

Grace on Mission: *Growing Together*

For the month of September we will be looking at our mission as a church together in a series called *Grace on Mission*. Our mission statement consists of four easy to remember points: *Loving God. Growing Together. Serving Others. Going to the World.*

These are the four things that Jesus has called us to do and it's what we want to focus on doing. We've got it on the front page of our website, we want to make sure it's on the front page of everything we do. This morning let's look at the second point of our mission statement: ***Growing Together.***

Ephesians 4:7,11-16

When we say growing together, what do we mean? Do we mean, growing spiritually as disciples? Or do we mean growing relationally in deeper fellowship? Or do we mean growing in ministry involvement in the church? Or do we mean that we enjoy numerical growth as a church? What exactly do we mean when we say *growing together*?

I believe when the Bible talks about us growing together it means all these things. Eph. 4 uses the metaphor of a body and a healthy body grows in many directions at once. If someone's body is growing, but their minds aren't growing, something is very wrong. If someone's body and mind are maturing and growing, but emotionally they are still 4 years old, something is wrong. We expect our bodies to grow in a complete sense, not just in one area.

That's what Paul has in mind. He says it in verse 15: *we are to grow up in every way...*

1. Growing in ministry effectiveness: *And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ...(vs. 11-12)*
2. Growing in spiritual maturity and discernment: *so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes. (vs. 14)*
3. Growing in loving relationships: *Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.*

We see this multi-layered approach to discipleship with Jesus as well. In fact, he originated it - the church is just supposed to copy it. He didn't enroll people in a webinar, he called them to follow him. Discipleship happened while they lived together and ate together and hung together. And as they grew closer to Jesus, they also grew closer to each other.

It wasn't always sunshine and sweetness. You had 12 pretty unspiritual dudes hanging out all the time together, and there were definitely arguments and disagreements and offenses. Some of them were recorded in the gospels, like when some of them were jealous that James and John asked to be seated on Jesus' left and right hand. Or the time they were arguing with each other about who was the greatest. There were probably times when they were pretty angry and offended at each other but Jesus held them together and through it all, not in spite of it all, they grew together and they grew to love each other.

Judas is the one exception: he loved money and his political aspirations more than he loved Jesus or the community of faith, so he betrayed the Savior for money.

But here's the common denominator, whether it be the 12 disciples or the Ephesian church or Grace Community Church, God intends for the church to be a place where believers grow up and grow together. Growth is a sign of life and health. Healthy things grow. When something stops growing, it starts to decline. Spiritual growth is a vital part of spiritual health.

1. Healthy spiritual growth is built on the gospel of Jesus Christ

Healthy spiritual growth needs to be built on the truth of scripture and the gospel of Jesus Christ. There have been movements that have grown very large in terms of followers but are not built on truth. Christians don't need to agree on every point of doctrine but there can't be any compromise on the big truths of the gospel.

...until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the fullness of Christ, so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes. Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ. Vv. 13-15

What Paul emphasizes as essential is doctrinal truth that is centered on Christ. Nothing is more important to healthy spiritual growth than Christ-centered truth. If we're not moored to Christ and the truth of God's word we will be like a boat being carried off course and into dangerous shoals by waves and winds.

Things change over time. Methods change. Styles change. Cultures change. Technologies change. Yesterday I saw an ad from 1977 advertising a 10 MB computer. 10 MB. My Starbuck's app uses nearly 2x that much. So this 10MB computer was on sale for only \$5995! Things change and the honestly, the church can't be a 10 MB computer in a 750GB world. But what never changes, what can never be modified, is the truth of Christ and the gospel. What we are growing into is to be the knowledge of the Son of God and the fullness of Christ.

In the end, how do we measure healthy growth? How can we gauge if a church is growing spiritually or just growing in size? If a church is producing good fruit or just producing programs? Our measurement needs to be Christ. Is Jesus loved? Is the gospel loved? Is truth being loved and lived out?

A church that wants to grow in a healthy way needs to grow on sound, healthy doctrine of Christ.

2. Growing together happens through grace-imparting connections

Last week we talked some about our connection to Jesus (called abiding) but that connection doesn't stop between Jesus and me, Jesus and you. Jesus is our head, and we are the body of Christ and we are connected by Christ to one another. Verse 16 says that the "whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love."

I see connection in that. The body - the church - is joined and held together (connection) by every joint - what does a joint do? It connects. And as each part is working properly it makes the body grow. We are connected in Christ to one another. This is really what discipleship is all about. The older I get the more I

realize how important relationships are to my walk with Christ. See, we can sit in a study learning all about the Bible, but it's really as we get out and start interacting with our family, start interacting with other believers, with people around us, that our discipleship is fleshed out. There are people who want nothing to do with Christianity, not because they don't know anything about Christianity, but because they've met some Christians. There are people who want nothing to do with the Bible, not because they've read the Bible but because they've met people who claim to believe the Bible. And they want nothing to do with what they see. There's something really wrong with that. Our discipleship needs to be walked out with people, and our growth in Christ happens, not as we're isolated from people, but as we're connected to people, to each other.

One of the ways a church facilitates these kinds of grace-imparting connections is by providing contexts for connections. A lot of that will happen individually, but the church needs gathering points to help people make connections. Call it a program, a class, a meeting, whatever, we need gathering points where we can help people make ministry and relational connections. Very simply, we need opportunity and context to connect with one another.

Last Wednesday night at our first FPU class, I really enjoyed the Dave Ramsey material, but it was also good after the video to share with each other (small class) a little about where we're at and how the material hits our lives. What I enjoyed is there was a sense of connecting - knowing other people just a little better. We want our meetings to not just be meetings, but opportunities and contexts for connecting.

So whether it be community groups or youth group, the new women's bible studies that are starting up, FPU class meeting on Wednesdays, Sunday morning services, these are all gathering points to help make connections. They don't guarantee meaningful connections, but they give us opportunity - a context - for connections. I want to encourage you to find a place to connect.

3. Growing together happens through grace-imparting contributions

Paul says in verse 16 that when each part is doing its part the body grows and is built up in love. A church that is growing in a healthy way isn't a place where a few people go to give, and a lot of people go to get. A healthy church is a church where each part is actively doing its part - a part that Jesus has uniquely gifted you and me to do.

What this tells me is that we can't grow simply by taking in, we need to give out. We can't just be consumers, we all need to be contributors. Once the multitude had been fed from the five loaves and two fish, the food stopped multiplying. God says, if you're not going to give out what I give you, I'll stop giving it. God supplies seed to the sower, not the eater. God has designed it such that we grow in grace as we give out grace. Grace grows in us as grace flows through us. I love seeing more and more people getting involved in different ways and contributing what the Lord has given them to the work of the Lord.

These are three principles that healthy spiritual growth is built on in the church. But in our closing minutes I want to share a couple thoughts that are more to each of us personally. Because there are personal choices we all need to make if we are to grow.

Three personal choices that are important to helping us grow

1. Choose resistance rather than ease

God has made it such that growth comes through resistance rather than ease. We grow by pressing against resistance, not by doing what's easy. The enemy of growing is coasting. Coasting is when we just

go along doing what's easy, what takes no effort, what fits comfortably in our comfort zone. If you are a runner, there might have been a time when running a quarter mile was a really big deal. But if you've been running a while and you're still running a quarter mile you're probably coasting. What once was stretching, eventually becomes coasting.

If you want to keep your mind sharp, you won't do it by watching Simpson reruns. You need to use it and push it; read new things, attempt new challenges, solve new problems. Growth is always a result of pushing against resistance, not coasting down the path of least resistance.

A challenging question for us to ponder is this: am I growing as a Christian? No matter how long we've known the Lord we can't take it for granted that we're growing. It's easy to plateau in our Christian walk. Plateaus aren't necessarily bad things, they only become bad things if we try to make them our permanent home. Plateaus are signals that we need to go to the next level, we need to press higher, push harder, take on new challenges.

If we never step out of what's comfortable and perfectly manageable for us without God, how can we expect our faith to grow stronger? If we isolate ourselves from deeper interactions with people where there's a risk of saying something stupid or being hurt, how can we expect to grow in love? If we never step out and serve in a way that is a little scary to us, how can we expect to grow in ministry?

Here's what I've found: when I plateau and don't do anything about it, I begin to feel spiritually listless and de-energized. But when I take on a new challenge - and really, it doesn't have to be anything huge or amazing - but some new challenge that pushes me a little further or out of my comfort zone, my faith is reenergized.

My encouragement to anyone in that place today: choose resistance rather than ease. Take on a new challenge - something that pushes you out of your comfort zone. It'll help you to grow in your walk with the Lord.

2. Be patient with gradual growth

When you live in an instant world, you lose the art of patience. What Paul describes in Eph. 4 with terms like "until we all attain..." and "so that we may no longer be children..." and "we are to grow up..." and "makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love" he's describing growth that comes over time, not in an instant. It's a process and so it takes patience.

a. Be patient with yourself

I just encouraged us to choose resistance and take on new challenges. But that doesn't have to start out as something huge. It can be a small step. God's kind of growth is usually gradual and slow. Steady but slow.

b. Be patient with others

One of the qualities of love is patience. "Love is patient..." Most relationships worth having take time to develop. Don't write off a relationship because it is shallow, it could be that God wants you to help deepen it.

We were recently watching a you tube video on the art of making small talk, and it made the point that small talk serves a necessary purpose. It's how we warm up to each other, get comfortable with each

other. It's awkward to dive too deep too fast. I was at a party many years ago when a woman came in, saw someone she knew was having marital issues, and her first words to her across the table in front of a crowd of people was, "how's your marriage?"

When you're at community group and you spend ten minutes talking with someone about how good the chips and salsa are, and you're afraid to stop talking about the chips and salsa cause you can't think of anything else to talk about, don't think that its worthless. This week you're talking about the chips and salsa, but next week you might go deeper...like talking about the brownies. It's good to press conversations into deeper waters eventually, but be patient.

3. Expect God to use people problems to further your spiritual growth

Know what I mean by "people problems"? I mean conflicts, offenses, disagreements, and they just rub me the wrong way kind of things. When these things come, that's not a sign from God to cut and run. It's an opportunity to grow. Grow by going to them and talking. Grow by forgiving. Grow by examining yourself to see if/how you are contributing to the problem. Grow by loving the unlovable. Grow by being patient with people.

Years ago I heard the analogy that when you want to bond two surfaces together, if they're both smooth, the bond will be weaker, but if you scratch the surfaces up a little, the bond will be that much stronger. Our bond to each other gets stronger and deeper if we go through conflict, offense, misunderstandings, and come out the other side still connected and committed to each other. Maybe a little scratched up, but that just makes the bond stronger.

One of the treasures God gives us in the church is the opportunity for us to live life together, however imperfectly. To grow up together, to work through issues together, to laugh and cry and experience different seasons of life together. Life is a marathon, not a sprint, and relationships and connecting with each other takes patience and grace.

What holds us together isn't each other. It's Christ. He is our bond, our connection. He is our head, he is our Lord and Savior, he is our source of love and life and growth.