

THE SIX SPIRITUAL GROWTH HABITS
by Andy Manning

The Bible says in 2 Corinthians 13:11, "Grow to maturity." God's will is for you to grow to maturity, living as a fully devoted, fully functioning, full court follower of Jesus Christ. That's why I'm excited to teach you six spiritual growth habits that will equip you to grow deeper and faster as a Christian.

This material is not for everyone. First, it is only for born again Christ followers. You can't grow if you haven't been born yet. You can learn about spiritual growth without being a Christ follower. But to begin growing as a Christian, the first step is to become one. The first step is to cross the line of faith, embrace Jesus Christ, and hand over the steering wheel of your life to Him. In an instant He will enter your heart and breathe new life in to you, and then you will begin the spiritual journey of growing up in Christ.

Second, this article is only for those who have spiritual ambition. It's only for those who have a holy discontent – they are discontent with where they are spiritually and they have a burning desire to be all they can be in Christ. This is for those who aren't content to remain spiritual babies, or even spiritual adolescents, but who want to grow to fullness in Christ. This material is for those aren't content to know about God, but who want to go to the deep end of the pool in their relationship with Jesus. It's for those who can say with Paul in Philippians 3:10-11, "10 I want to know Christ and experience the mighty power that raised him from the dead. I want to suffer with him, sharing in his death, 11 so that one way or another I will experience the resurrection from the dead!" This message is for those who aren't satisfied with religion, rules and rituals. It's for those who want to experience God's best for their life; it's for those who want to be used greatly by God; it's for those who want to see God move mightily on their behalf.

This is what the Bible teaches: While every Christian grows older, not every Christian grows up. I've encountered people who have been Christians for many years, but they are shallow in their faith; at the same time, I've encountered people who've only been following Christ a short amount of time, but their relationship with Jesus is so passionate, vibrant, and fruitful. Spiritual growth is commanded, but it's not automatic.

Before we get into the process of spiritual growth (the six growth habits), I want us to think through the product, the purpose, and the payoff of spiritual growth.

1. The Product of Spiritual Growth

Let's begin with the product of spiritual growth. What is spiritual maturity? What does it look like to be fully devoted to Jesus Christ? Spiritual maturity is loving Jesus, becoming more like Him, and loving others. That's it. It's really that simple.

The Bible says in Matthew 22:37-39, “37 Jesus replied, ‘You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your mind. 38 This is the first and greatest commandment. 39 A second is equally important: Love your neighbor as yourself.’”

Spiritual growth is simply about love. Are you becoming a more loving person? Love essentially expresses itself in service and sacrifice to Jesus and to others. That’s what God is trying to produce in and through your life.

Christianity is not a religion with a bunch of Dos and Don’ts. It’s about a relationship with Jesus, in which you are learning to love Him more and more and become more like Him each and every day in your convictions (what you believe), your character (how you feel), and your conduct (how you behave).

2. The Purpose of Spiritual Growth

Let’s move on to the purpose of spiritual growth, because this is where many Christians have a misunderstanding. The Bible says in 2 Peter 1:8. “The more you grow like this, the more productive and useful you will be in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.” Why does Jesus want us to grow spiritually? To become more useful to Him.

God is on a mission to bring people to Jesus so they can be forgiven of their sins and saved from eternal judgment. It’s a serious mission. And He wants to use you in that mission. God created you to be a part of His purpose, His mission in the world. And the purpose of growing you spiritually is ultimately so that you can become more productive and useful to Him.

God doesn’t exist for you, to be your personal genie, to give you what you want and need, to rescue from nasty situations, and to make all your dreams come true. God doesn’t exist to make your relationships better, to help you with your finances, to make you happy and prosperous. It’s the other way around. You exist for God, to make Him happy, to be used to accomplish His purposes. Ultimately growing in Christ can benefit you financially, relationally, emotionally, professionally, and even physically, but that’s not the purpose. The purpose of spiritual growth is so that you can be more productive and useful to God.

A lot of churches focus on getting their people to stop doing stuff; to stop sinning in this way, and stop sinning in that way. And that’s important. But it’s only a small part of spiritual growth. It’s not only about stopping the bad stuff, but about fulfilling your divine potential in Christ.

There’s also a whole camp of churches that seem to focus spiritual growth on learning; on having and understanding a correct set of beliefs. And that is important, but spiritual growth isn’t only about how much you know, but about how much you’re doing with what you know. What are you accomplishing for Jesus? How are you being used by Jesus to influence and impact your world? Are you bearing spiritual fruit – the fruit of good deeds and spiritual

offspring? The ultimate purpose and goal of growing you spiritually is so that you will be more productive and useful to God.

3. The Payoff of Spiritual Growth

And now for the payoff. What's in it for me? Why should I want to grow spiritually?

- Imagine being used greatly by God to impact the world for Jesus.
- Imagine having an intimate relationship with Jesus, so that you can clearly hear His voice and leadings and wisdom for every decision.
- Imagine having the convictions, character, and conduct of Jesus so that you could react and respond in a godly way in tough situations and when dealing with difficult people.
- Imagine being able to treat others as Jesus would.
- Imagine being able to handle your finances like Jesus.
- Imagine being able to raise your children like Jesus would.
- Imagine what your business would look like, what your family would look like, what your marriage would look like if you were spiritually mature.
- Imagine how it would feel to be spiritually mature; how it would feel to be used greatly by God; how it would feel to be intimate with Jesus; how it would feel to have such faith that you could have peace and joy and patience in the most trying of circumstances.
- Imagine how it would feel to have total self-control, so that you aren't controlled by your cravings for food, and drugs, and laziness, and immorality.

4. The Process of Spiritual Growth

Now let's look at the process of spiritual growth. Wouldn't it be cool if you could achieve a toned, healthy, ripped, beautiful body without going to the gym and eating right? Yes! And that's really the way we are, as people. We would like the product without enduring the process; we would like the payoff without paying the price. We like the microwave oven, and fast food, and the drive through, and get-rich-quick schemes. We like short-cuts to the top. Unfortunately, all real success, whether it's educational, relational, financial, professional, or spiritual can't be achieved via short cuts. There is a process that must be endured; a price that must be paid.

The Bible says in 1 Timothy 4:7, "Train yourself to be godly. Physical training is good, but training for godliness is much better, promising benefits in this life and in the one to come."

How do you achieve godliness or spiritual growth? Training. Just like there are habits, rituals, disciplines, and exercises that must be consistently followed over the long-haul to achieve physical growth and fitness, there are exercises, habits, and disciplines that will help us train for spiritual growth.

Why habits? There is power in repeated, consistent behaviors. Repeat a negative action enough times and it becomes a harmful addiction that can destroy your life. Repeat a positive action enough times and it becomes a habit that leads to excellence. This truth is not new. Thousands of years ago Aristotle said, “We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, then, is not an act, but a habit.”

The following are the six most basic, most essential spiritual growth habits known to man. Practice these consistently, over the long haul, and you’ll see the product of spiritual maturity.

The Six Spiritual Growth Habits

1. Gather on Sundays for corporate worship.

The first growth habit is to gather on Sundays for corporate worship – corporate as opposed to private. There is suburban myth going around that it’s possible to be a Christian without attending church. False. You can be saved, but you can’t be a practicing, exercising, growing believer without attending church.

It aggravates me when people say they like Jesus but not the church. That’s like telling a woman that you like her but not her body. The church is body of Christ. It also frustrates me when people say the reason they don’t attend church is because they don’t like organized religion. And I usually say, “Great! You’ll fit right in at Church Acadiana because we’re unorganized religion!” Seriously, since when does the absence of order, rhythm, organization, and structure mean the presence of spiritual authenticity? That’s a bunch of baloney.

Watching church on television and listening on the radio can be a good supplement to corporate worship, but it’s not a valid substitute. The Bible says in Hebrews 10:25, “You should not stay away from the church meetings, as some are doing, but you should meet together and encourage each other. Do this even more as you see the day coming.”

I also like what Theodore Roosevelt said. “You may worship God anywhere at any time. But the chances are that you will not do so unless you have first learned to worship him in some particular place at some particular time.”

Attending church every Sunday is really the starting point, the most basic spiritual growth habit to develop. If you aren’t ready for any of the others, at least do this one. Since the beginning of the Christian religion believers have been gathering for corporate worship on Sundays.

It’s so crucial for your growth that you gather with other believers that you know and who know you for worship. You will sing together, serve together, study Biblical teaching together, and give tithes and offerings together. It’s a huge boost to your faith; and also to your *health*.

The Dallas Morning News published a study done by the Heritage Foundation in 1996. The study revealed that regularly attending worship services reduces suicide, drug and alcohol

abuse, crime, out-of-wedlock births, and divorce. The study found that these people are far happier and healthier, have a lower rate of depression, higher self-esteem, longer, happier marriages, and better sex (for the women; the men were not mentioned in the study). The study also reported that regular worship attendance helps inner city youth escape poverty, and the family income of those who regularly attend worship services is almost \$15,000 higher than those who do not attend.

The study found that virtually all of the African-American men in prison today either never attended worship services or stopped going by the time they were ten years old. The study also revealed that pregnancy among African-American and Spanish-American teenagers is rare for those who regularly attend worship services.

The study also found that poor African-Americans and Hispanics who attend church are definitely more optimistic about their future, have better relationships with parents, have more serious goals, see racism as less of an obstacle, and view the world as a place in which they can achieve.

Is a study from 1996 a little too old for you? A *Wall Street Journal* article in 2005 reported on the results of a study that, "a growing body of scientific evidence shows that Americans who attend religious services at least once a week enjoy better-than-average health and lower rates of illness, including depression. Perhaps most important, the studies show that weekly attendance confers a significant reduction in mortality risk over a given period of time."

And that's not all! In an interview with sociologist Brad Wilcox in 2006 by Christianity Today, churchgoers – those who regularly attend church – are far more likely not to get divorced than those who don't attend church.

And you know what? As with anything, you get out of worship what you put in to it. Become an active participant in corporate worship. Sing with your whole heart. Give cheerfully. Volunteer on a ministry team. And listen actively. Bring a pen, a Bible, and a notebook. Pour yourself in to worship, and you'll be amazed at how God uses it to grow you and benefit you.

2. Connect with other believers in a Home Group.

The second growth habit is to connect with other believers in a Home Group. What's a Home Group? A Home Group is a small group of 5-10 people who gather weekly to study the Bible and pray.

From the very beginning Christians have had two essential gatherings: the large group, or corporate worship on Sundays, and then smaller gathering in homes. The Bible says in Acts 2:46, "They worshiped together at the Temple each day, met in homes for the Lord's Supper, and shared their meals with great joy and generosity."

Attending corporate worship is good, but it's not sufficient if you want to keep growing. On Sunday...

- I can deliver the Word of God, but a Home Group provides an opportunity to discuss and even debate the Word of God.
- I can answer general questions about God's Word, but in a Home Group you can ask the specific questions most important and pertinent to you.
- I can provide inspiration, but a Home Group provides you with a foundation.
- I can provide you with motivation, but a Home Group provides you with interpretation.
- I can provide instruction, but a Home Group provides implementation.
- I can provide content, but a Home Group will help you apply the content to the context of your life.
- On Sundays I can tell you what to do, but a Home Group does it with you.
- I can show you your responsibilities, but a Home Group provides accountability.
- I can go ahead of you and lead you, but a Home Group walks with you.
- I can tell you to show up, but a Home Group can make sure that you do.
- I can teach you to pray, but a Home Group can pray with you.
- I can pray about your life, but a Home Group can do life with you.

At Church Acadiana our Home Groups are all about making the message personal and deepening friendships. What do I mean by making the message personal? Every week our Home Groups take a discussion guide based on the Sunday sermon and discuss, go deeper, and encourage each another to apply the message to their lives. They make the message personal.

What about deepening friendships? Home Groups deepen friendships in three ways: Prayer, care, and fun. They pray for one another. They care for one another in times of sickness, hardship, or heartache. And they do fun stuff together like watching movies, having parties, eating out, etc.

The church is a spiritual family in which we are to care for one another in times of hardship, loss, suffering, and sickness. How can people take care of you if they don't know you? Home Groups provide the environment for you to know and be known; care for and be cared for; encourage and be encouraged.

"Well, isn't it enough if you know us, Pastor?" No! When I became a pastor, I theoretically left the ministry. The Bible says that my job now is not to visit you in the hospital and take care of you when you are sick. My job is now to equip you to care for one another. The Bible says in Ephesians 4:11-12, "11 Now these are the gifts Christ gave to the church: the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, and the pastors and teachers. 12 Their responsibility is to equip God's people to do his work and build up the church, the body of Christ." The church is healthiest not when the Pastor ministers to the Body, but when the Body ministers to the Body. That's why you need a Home Group.

3. Serve Christ on a ministry team.

The third growth habit is to serve Christ on a ministry team. Have you have heard of the Dead Sea? The Dead Sea is a body of water in Israel that is completely dead. Nothing lives in it. No plant life. No animal life. The reason is that six million tons of water flow in to the dead sea every day from rivers and streams, but there's no outlet. The water is so full of sulphur, salt, and other nitrous chemicals that nothing can survive. It's dead because it has inflow, but no outlet.

There are many Christians who are dead in their walk with Christ. They aren't growing. They are spiritually unhealthy, and it's not because they aren't getting ministered to. They have inflow – plenty of Bible study, praise and worship, and Biblical preaching. The problem is they have no outlet for ministry. They are receiving, receiving, receiving, but not giving back. Some of you want to grow, but you don't need another Bible study; you don't need more praise and worship; and you don't need deeper Bible preaching. You need to serve in a ministry. You need both inflow and outflow to have a healthy spiritual life.

There are a lot of Christians that are spiritually bored. They are bored in their walk with God; they feel as though they've hit a ceiling in their spiritual maturity. And many times they will express a desire to go deeper. But what does it mean to go deeper? Sometimes they assume it means a more ecstatic, emotional experience with God; more miracles and wonders. They think it means learning more; perhaps special, spiritual secrets, gaining knowledge reserved only for the spiritually elite. But what they truly need to grow spiritually is not any of those things; they need to serve more people for Jesus and work to reach more people for Jesus. That's true spiritual depth – being used mightily for God to reach and love and serve and impact and influence more people.

If you're bored with your spiritual walk, it probably means it's time for you to step up in service. Instead of attending that Home Group, maybe it's time to lead a Home Group. Instead of leading a Home Group, maybe it's time to become a leader of Home Group leaders. Instead of volunteering on Sundays, maybe it's time to start leading a team of volunteers, and then leading volunteer leaders. Are you bored with the preaching? Maybe it's time for you to invite a friend who is lost or a new believer to listen, and then discussing it with them over lunch; or maybe it's time for you to start a new church and do the preaching yourself.

This is something else to consider: A person who attends but doesn't volunteer will drop out within a year. If people begin to serve, they stick. If a person is simply being served, it is highly unlikely that that person will make it in the long term. They'll either drop out of church altogether, or they'll start attending a different church for another year of "sit and soak" Christianity before they leave again.

The Bible says in Ephesians 4:16, "He makes the whole body fit together perfectly. As each part does its own special work, it helps the other parts grow, so that the whole body is healthy and growing and full of love."

We have a dream at Church of creating a church where unchurched people love to attend, and where they would grow to become fully devoted followers of Jesus. That takes a lot of people to accomplish. It takes a team. Each and every Sunday teams of volunteers gather at Church Acadiana to create a worship experience that will reach our community for Christ. And it is so gratifying and exciting to impact people for eternity. Every volunteer, no matter what their role is, is a link in the chain of life-change. If you want to take your walk with Christ to the next level, volunteer and become a link in the chain of life-change in the church.

4. Commune with Christ in a daily quiet time.

The fourth growth habit is to commune with Christ in a daily quiet time. Read the biographies of the spiritual giants and heroes throughout the ages and you'll find something remarkable – they all spent daily alone time with God reading the Bible and in prayer.

A daily quiet time is simply that. Set aside a regular time and place each day to spend with God to talk to God in prayer and listen to God through His Word. The more time you spend with someone, the more you'll get to know them, and the more you'll begin to act like them.

Nothing will help you grow faster and keep you closer to God than the simple exercise of feeding on God's Word for a few minutes every day. For starters, I recommend that you begin with the book of Matthew and read your way through the New Testament. You may want to start with one chapter a day. Keep a pencil or marker nearby so you can underline or highlight verses that are most meaningful to you. And purchase a new Bible with a modern, easy-to-understand translation. My favorite is the New Living Translation (NLT), but the New International Version (NIV) is good, too.

I also want to encourage you to take daily time to pray. Prayer is simply talking to God. He is your Heavenly Father, and He wants to have a personal relationship with you. When I pray in the morning I follow a simple plan called ACTS that helps me to stay focused. It's an acronym that means Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, and Supplication. First I begin with adoration, simply telling God how much I love Him and why He is precious to me. Then I spend time in confession, admitting my sins to God and rededicating myself to Him. Next I have a time of Thanksgiving, in which I thank God for all of His blessings. Finally I end with a time of supplication, in which I ask God for help for myself and others, and I ask God to help me reach my family and friends for Christ. Remember to be specific, and remember that prayer is simply a conversation. Talk to God about anything, anytime, anyplace.

5. Bring a tithe of your finances to God.

The fifth growth habit is to bring a tithe of your finances to God's house, the local church. The word *tithe* means a tenth part. And from the beginning God has instructed His people to bring the first ten percent of their income to the local house of worship.

What happens when you tithe? First of all, it advances God's work. It takes money to run an organization. It annoys me that people are fine when PBS begs for money, or when the Christian radio station asks for money, or when Habitat for Humanity, The Salvation Army, the Red Cross, or a politician asks for money; but when the local church talks about the importance of giving tithes and offerings to the house of God people get uptight and angry and accuse the church of being greedy and "all about money." The funny thing is that all these other charities and causes are concerned with temporary and physical needs, which are important, but the local church's focus is on people's eternal and spiritual needs, and that's far more important. If all Christians would bring the tithe faithfully, imagine what could be accomplished!

Not only does tithing advance God's work, but it will bless your finances. Some people say they can't afford to tithe. I can't afford *not* to tithe. The Bible says in Malachi 3:10, "Bring all the tithes into the storehouse so there will be enough food in my Temple. If you do," says the Lord of Heaven's Armies, "I will open the windows of heaven for you. I will pour out a blessing so great you won't have enough room to take it in! Try it! Put me to the test!"

And third, when you tithe, it grows your faith. The Bible says in Matthew 6:21, "Wherever your treasure is, there the desires of your heart will also be." You can tell where your priorities are by looking at how you spend your money. But what's exciting is that you can shift your priorities by shifting how you spend your money. In other words, you don't have to wait until you get passionate about the church or Jesus to start tithing; start tithing, and you will get passionate about the church, and about God, and about reaching people for Christ, because your heart will follow your money.

6. Invite people far from God to a Sunday worship experience.

The sixth and final growth habit is to invite people far from God to attend church with you. I'm talking about being a witness for Christ. The Bible says in Acts 1:8, "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you. And you will be my witnesses, telling people about me everywhere—in Jerusalem, throughout Judea, in Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

There are only two things you can do on earth that you can't do in Heaven: sin and share your faith. How do you think God wants you to be spending your time? Knowing Christ and making Him known. That's what life is all about. And the easiest way to lead your friends to Christ is to invite them to church with you.

It's been said that the world has yet to see what God will do with a person who is fully devoted to Him. Imagine what would happen in and through your life if you would begin to run after Christ with all your heart, consistently practicing all six spiritual growth habits!

If God has used this article to instruct and inspire you in any way, I'd love to hear from you personally. Please email me at andylydia@cox.net. God bless!