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HOW TO MATURE IN CHRIST

JERRY BRIDGES

BEST-SELLING AUTHOR OF *The Pursuit of Holiness*



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*To*  
*Dwight and Lucille Custis*  
*and the congregation of*  
*Trinity Bible Church*

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## P R E F A C E

**D**URING THE FIRST three years of my Christian life, I grew very little. I didn't know how to grow my faith, and I didn't realize I should be intentional about it. I think this is true of many believers today, even some who have been Christians for several years. They are not growing because they don't know how to grow and are not even aware that they should be growing. This book aims to encourage believers, both new and old, to grow and to provide basic instruction for being intentional about it.

To borrow an expression from the collegiate world, I would describe this book as *Christian Growth 101*. It is meant to be basic instruction for spiritual growth. At the same time, I believe already-growing Christians will profit from a review of these principles of growth. We all need to be continually refreshed in the truths we have learned because we have a natural tendency to drift away from them. So to quote the apostle Peter, "I will . . . remind you of these things, even though you know them and are firmly established in the truth you now have" (2 Peter 1:12). Someone has said that we need to be reminded more than we need to be instructed. Therefore, I do not apologize for, so to speak, "re-plowing old ground."

## HEADER

Much of the material in this book has appeared in my earlier works. This is by design. The editorial team at NavPress thought I had addressed key principles of spiritual growth in previous writings, but that they were scattered among eight different books. In this book, I have gathered into one volume all I have written about Christian growth in those early works making it more accessible in a single book.

In the following section, *Acknowledgments*, I have listed the appropriate chapters from the various books from which each chapter is drawn. In every instance, the previous material has been heavily revised and adapted for this book. Anyone wishing to explore more fully what I have said on a given subject can easily locate the original material by referring to the *Acknowledgments* section.

There are four people who deserve a special word of thanks for their part in the preparation of this book. First: Don Simpson of NavPress, who not only served as primary editor but who also worked with me in selecting material from the earlier books to include in this volume. Second: Louise Bridgewater and Brenda Lagasse, who rendered invaluable service in typing and proofreading all the adaptations of the original material in a very short time frame. Finally: my wife Jane, who exercised considerable patience during the time I had to set aside activities we had planned to do together so that I could meet the tight deadline for this book. Thanks to each one of you.

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CHAPTER 1 IS new written material from spoken messages given at various times, none of which has previously appeared in print.

Chapter 2 is adapted from *Transforming Grace*, NavPress, 1991 (chapter 6, “Compelled by Love”).

Chapter 3 is adapted from *The Discipline of Grace*, NavPress, 1994 (chapter 5, “Disciplined by Grace”).

Chapter 4 is adapted from *The Discipline of Grace* (chapter 6, “Transformed into His Likeness”).

Chapter 5 is all new material, although it draws upon a lifetime of teaching and writing on the importance of the Bible in Christian growth.

Chapter 6 is adapted from *The Discipline of Grace* (chapter 10, “The Discipline of Convictions”). Some new material not previously published has been added.

Chapter 7 is adapted from a small section of *Transforming Grace* (chapter 8, “Holiness: A Gift of God’s Grace,” page 115) and from *The Discipline of Grace* (chapter 8, “Dependent Discipline”).

Chapter 8 is adapted from *The Crisis of Caring*, P&R Publishing

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Chapter 9 is adapted from *The Discipline of Grace* (chapter 6, “Transformed into His Likeness,” pp. 105-109) and from *The Gospel for Real Life*, NavPress, 2002 (chapter 15, “The Gospel and Sanctification”).

Chapter 10 is adapted from a small section of *The Pursuit of Holiness*, NavPress, 1978, 1996 (chapter 2, “The Holiness of God”) and from *The Discipline of Grace* (chapter 11, “The Discipline of Choices”).

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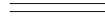
Chapter 12 is adapted from spoken messages given on the subject of trusting God and from *The Discipline of Grace* (chapter 13, “The Discipline of Adversity”).

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THE  
NECESSITY  
OF  
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GROWTH

SECTION ONE



THE  
NECESSITY  
OF  
SPIRITUAL  
GROWTH

CHAPTER I

THE FOUNDATION  
FOR GROWTH

SOME YEARS AGO we planted a tree on the west side of our house expecting it to grow and eventually shade us from the afternoon sun. We were disappointed because, for some reason, the tree didn't grow. It didn't die, but neither did it grow. Possibly, it was because it was poor stock to begin with. After some effort to spur its growth, we finally had it removed and replaced with a tree that happily has grown. Soon this tree will be tall enough to fulfill the purpose for which it was planted. It will shade our house from the hot afternoon sun.

Growth is a normal expression of life. Whether we think of plants, animals, or people, we expect them to grow until they reach maturity. When something or someone doesn't grow, we know something is wrong.

Growth is also a normal expression of the Christian life. The New Testament writers assume growth and constantly urge us to pursue it. Peter urges us to "Grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ" (2 Peter 3:18). Paul instructs us that by "speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ" (Ephesians 4:15).

SECTION ONE: THE NECESSITY OF SPIRITUAL GROWTH

In fact, in distinction from the physical realm, Christians should never stop growing spiritually. Paul commended the Thessalonian believers for their seeking to please God and to love other believers. And yet, in both instances, he urged them to do so “more and more” (1 Thessalonians 4:1,10). He wanted them to continue to grow in these aspects of their Christian lives. There is no such thing as an “adult Christian” who no longer needs to grow. Growth is not only normal for new believers but also for those who have walked with God fifty years or more.

Of course, almost all growth (both physical and spiritual) is incremental. We can't watch either plants or people grow before our eyes. We can only observe it over time. This is also true in the Christian life. And, of course, different people grow at different rates. And none of us grow at the same steady rate all the time. But even when we allow for differences in people and different eras of growth in our individual lives, the fact remains that we should all be growing spiritually. When a believer doesn't grow, something is wrong!

This book assumes that those who read it want to grow. There are some people who for one reason or another don't seem to want to grow, and that's a different story. But if you have picked up this book, it is likely that you want to grow and that you are looking for all the help you can get. That's my attitude when I pick up a Christian book, and I assume it's also yours. So we need to address the question: How do we grow spiritually?

Let's think about physical growth for a moment. Children grow without thinking about it. In fact, our basic physical growth (height and body structure) is beyond our control. My older brother grew to be 6'2" tall. I expected to follow suit. So when I realized I had topped out at 5'9 1/2" (I always add the half inch), I was quite disappointed.

But there was nothing I could do. As much as I wanted to be at least 6' tall, I couldn't make myself grow.

However, we all know that intellectual growth or growth in a physical skill is a different matter. Once a little girl starts to school, she must apply herself if she is to grow intellectually. Later on, if she wants to play on the basketball team, she must again apply herself both mentally and physically.

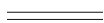
Eventually, this little girl becomes a young woman and goes off to college. Now she wants to prepare herself for a professional career of some kind. She gives herself to her studies because she desires to excel in her chosen career field. Obviously, some students are more diligent than others. Some are content to simply muddle through and get a degree. But those who want to excel apply themselves. Intellectual or professional growth doesn't just happen. It only comes with intentional effort. And usually the degree of growth is directly related to the degree of effort.

The same is true in spiritual growth. It doesn't just happen. In fact, it doesn't even happen by spiritual osmosis, that is, by just being around other believers and unconsciously assimilating their spirituality. Spiritual growth occurs as a result of *intentional* and *appropriate* effort. The word *intentional* implies a diligent pursuit of a clear goal. *Appropriate* indicates that we must use the God-given ways of growth given to us in the Bible. We usually refer to these ways of growth as "spiritual disciplines." We'll explore what these disciplines are in later chapters. But for now, we must lay an important foundation—the foundation of grace.

Over 150 years ago Archibald Alexander, the first president of Princeton Theological Seminary, wrote some thoughts on "hindrances to spiritual growth." The first hindrance he listed was "a defect in our belief in the freeness of divine grace."<sup>1</sup> In his elaboration on that statement, he

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essentially said that a correct understanding of God's grace and a consistent appropriation of it must be the foundation of all our personal efforts to grow spiritually.



## WHAT IS GRACE?

Because grace is foundational to our Christian growth, it's important that we have a correct understanding of it. Unfortunately, there is a lot of misunderstanding about the nature of grace.

Perhaps the most common misconception of grace is captured in a statement I once read: Grace is the idea that we are loved and accepted by God just as we are and that God's approval does not have to be earned; it is simply there. Here, God seems to be pictured as the proverbial, indulgent, divine grandfather in the sky who smiles down upon us regardless of our behavior and character. This seems to be typical of the average person's understanding of God's grace.

By contrast, however, the Bible teaches us that the grace of God "teaches us to say 'No' to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives" (Titus 2:12). God does love us and accepts us as sinners "just as we are." But He does not leave us that way. Rather, by the same grace through which He saves us, He sets about to change everyone who experiences that grace.

The statement that "God's approval does not have to be earned but is simply there" is not true. God's approval *does* have to be earned. But the gospel tells us that His approval was earned for us by Jesus Christ in His sinless life and sin-bearing death. It is true that God's favor does not have to be earned *by us*. In fact, it cannot be earned by us. But it comes to us without earning because Jesus paid for it in our place as our substitute.

What about the time-honored definition of grace as *God's unmerited favor*? While it is not wrong, I believe it is inadequate. So here is a definition that I believe captures the biblical meaning of grace: *Grace is God's favor through Christ to people who deserve His disfavor.*

There are two elements in this definition that are missing in the shorter definition above. The first is the realization that we actually deserve God's disfavor because of our sin. Or to put it starkly, in biblical terms, we deserve His *curse* (see Galatians 3:10).

The second element that I have added is the term *through Christ*. It is through Christ, because of His death on the cross, that we don't receive the disfavor or curse we all deserve. As Paul wrote in Galatians 3:13, "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us." And it is through Christ, because of His perfect obedience to the whole will of God, that we receive the blessings we don't deserve. Christ bore our curse and earned our blessing. That is the meaning of grace.

We see this concept of Christ bearing our curse and earning our blessing set forth in 2 Corinthians 5:21: "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God."

In this somewhat difficult-to-understand language, Paul was saying that God charged our sin to Christ and credited His righteousness to us. Or to paraphrase: "God treated Christ as we deserved to be treated in order that He might treat us as He deserved to be treated." That is grace.

So grace is God's favor to us through Christ, but God's favor is much more than simply a favorable disposition toward us. God's grace is always presented in Scripture as God in action toward us for our good. For example, God's grace saves us (see Ephesians 2:8-9; Romans 5:1); it gives us spiritual strength (see 2 Timothy 2:1); sustains us in times of trial (see 2 Corinthians 12:9); and equips us for ministry

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(see Romans 12:6). We can say that every blessing that comes to us is an expression of God's grace. That means that Christ *earned* all those blessings for us by His sinless life and sin-bearing death.

It is important that we grasp this cardinal truth before we proceed to the various means of growth God has given us. Otherwise, we will subtly and unconsciously begin to see these disciplines that God has given us for our good as disciplines to be practiced in order to earn or maintain His favor.

Remember our definition of grace. Jesus has already earned God's favor for you. Just as you can do nothing to earn your salvation (the most important blessing of all), so you can do nothing to earn God's favor in your daily life. If you do not grasp this truth, the spiritual disciplines that are intended to help you grow will become burdensome duties you think you must practice in order to maintain God's favor.



## THE BOOKENDS

Let's look at this truth another way. Have you ever tried to arrange some books on a shelf without first setting up bookends? You know what happens. The books begin to fall, first sidewise, and then one or more of them inevitably tumbles to the floor. In frustration, you finally do what you should have done at the beginning. You get some bookends and put them in place.

Now, as we consider the various means by which Christians grow, think of each one of them as a book you are putting on the shelf of your life. In order to keep those books in place, you need two bookends.

The first bookend we need to set in place is *the righteousness of Christ*. The most important question any person can ask is: How can I, a sinful person, be accepted by an infinitely holy and righteous God?

Paul tells us that it is by trusting in the righteousness of Christ. Paul himself was a devout Jew, and his religious credentials were impressive during the time in which he lived (see Philippians 3:4-6). And yet Paul said he counted all his religious credentials as rubbish in order that he might “gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law [that is, by trying to earn God’s acceptance through my own obedience to God’s law], but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith” (Philippians 3:8-9).

Paul found his acceptance with God not in his own imperfect obedience, as impressive as it was, but by trusting in the perfect righteousness of Jesus Christ which God credits to all who trust in Him as Savior. This is what faith is—trusting in Jesus Christ alone as one’s Savior.

In Romans 3 and 4 and Galatians 2, Paul uses a legal term to describe this righteousness that he and all believers have in Christ. It is the word *justification*, which comes from the verb “to justify” and which means to declare righteous. In other words, when we trust in Christ as our Savior, God justifies us or declares us righteous on the basis that He has charged our sin to Christ and credited His righteousness to us. God does this at the very moment we trust in Christ. So we can say that justification is a point-in-time event that happened in our past. But for Paul, justification was more than a past event. It seems obvious from a close reading of Philippians 3:9 that he also considered it a *present reality*. Every day Paul lived in the glorious reality that he stood before God clothed in the righteousness of Christ and accepted by Him on the basis of that righteousness.

If you and I are to succeed in putting on the shelf of our lives the various volumes of Christian disciplines that we need in order to grow, we absolutely must have the bookend of Christ’s righteousness firmly in place.

SECTION ONE: THE NECESSITY OF SPIRITUAL GROWTH

The second bookend we must set in place is *the power of Christ*. Just as our acceptance with God must come through the righteousness of Christ, so our power to live the Christian life must come from Christ as well. Too often we try to grow by our own willpower and self-discipline. We assume that if we read the Bible enough and pray enough, we will grow. We approach the Christian life much like a student approaches a difficult course in college—just buckle down and try harder. That attitude assumes that we have the ability within ourselves to grow into maturity as believers. But as Jesus indicated in John 15:5, we have no ability within ourselves to grow. All of the ability must come from Him.

Think of an electronic appliance that you use either for personal care or in the kitchen. I think of my electric shaver. That shaver has within its case a small motor that causes the shaver to do its job. But that motor has no power of its own. It is completely dependent on an external source of electric current. Without the supply of that power, it is useless.

You and I have been given a new heart at the time of our conversion (see Ezekiel 36:26-27). A fundamental change has indeed taken place in our inner being. We really are new creations in Christ. To stay with the shaver analogy, we now have a new motor designed to receive the electric current. But the power is still outside of us. It resides in Jesus Christ and is applied to our hearts by the Holy Spirit as we depend on Him.

This is why Paul makes such statements as “I can do everything through him who gives me strength” (Philippians 4:13) and “To this end [that is, pursuing his ministry] I labor, struggling with all his energy, which so powerfully works in me” (Colossians 1:29).

Paul expected to grow in his own spiritual life, and he expected to be fruitful in his ministry. His confidence, however, was not based on

his own ability or determination but in the fact that he could rely on the power of Christ working in him to enable him.

We will explore in more detail in chapter 7 how we draw upon the power of Christ. For now, we just want to become aware that we need these two “bookends.”

One further observation will be helpful, however. Bookends usually come in pairs, both with a common design. Our spiritual bookends of Christian growth also come as a pair. The common element of their design is the word *dependence*. We are dependent upon the righteousness of Christ for our acceptance with God, and we are dependent on the power of Christ for our ability to pursue spiritual growth.

This idea of dependence is totally contrary to our cultural way of thinking. We want to earn our acceptance with God by our own performance. We’ve been taught in any number of ways that “there is no such thing as a free lunch” and “you get what you pay for.” The idea of basing our standing with God on someone else’s payment—on the sinless life and sin-bearing death of Christ—is hard for us to accept.

Similarly, we’ve been taught to be self-reliant—to reach down deep within ourselves to find whatever strength we need. We’ve been assured that we can do anything if we just believe in ourselves and try hard enough. The idea of looking outside of ourselves for the power to grow spiritually runs counter to all we’ve been taught, and it’s also difficult to accept.

But if we are going to experience any success at all in putting on the shelf of our lives the various “books” of Christian growth, we must first set in place these two bookends. We must learn to depend on both the righteousness of Christ and the power of Christ. This is what it means to live by grace. And this is why grace is foundational to spiritual growth.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

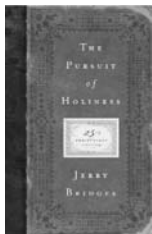
JERRY BRIDGES is a staff member of The Navigators Collegiate Ministries where he is involved in staff training and also serves as a resource person to those ministering on university campuses.

He has been on the staff of The Navigators since 1955. From 1979 through 1994, he served as Vice President for Corporate Affairs. In addition to his work in the Collegiate Ministries, he also serves from time to time as a guest lecturer at several seminaries and speaks at numerous conferences and retreats, both in the U.S. and overseas.

Jerry is the author of several books. His most well known is *The Pursuit of Holiness*, which has sold more than a million copies. Other titles include *The Practice of Godliness*, *Trusting God Even When Life Hurts*, *Transforming Grace*, *The Discipline of Grace*, *The Gospel for Real Life*, *The Crisis of Caring*, and *The Joy of Fearing God*.

Jerry and his wife Jane live in Colorado Springs, Colorado. They have two adult children and five grandchildren.

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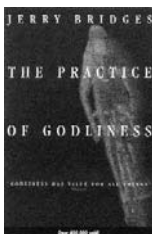
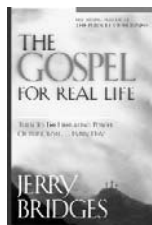
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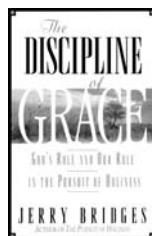
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