Don’t Judge Your Spiritual Condition By Feelings

David Wilkerson
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The apostle Paul assured the Thessalonians that they'd learned how to walk pleasing before the Lord. He told them, "Ye have received of us how ye ought to walk and to please God" (1 Thessalonians 4:1). Paul then added this exhortation: "So ye would abound more and more" (4:1).

To abound means to increase. Paul was saying, "You've been sitting under sound gospel preaching. So now you have a solid foundation beneath you. Therefore, you ought to be increasing in grace in all ways -- in your faith, your knowledge, your love."

Paul also spoke of such abounding to the Corinthians: "As ye abound in every thing, in faith, and utterance, and knowledge, and in all diligence, and in your love to us, see that ye abound in this grace also" (2 Corinthians 8:7). He said, in other words, "God's Spirit has wrought major changes in your life. Therefore, you ought to be giving more of yourself in all ways -- in your time, your finances, your talents."

These passages make it clear: everyone who's been fed God's word is expected to grow in grace. God has endowed gifts to pastors, teachers, prophets and evangelists for this express purpose: to cause his church to grow. No believer is to remain a babe in Christ. We're expected to grow in him so that we're not carried away by any false thing.

Jesus himself speaks of a constant increase in our lives: "I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly" (John 10:10). Christ commended the church at Thyatira for having grown in grace: "I know thy works, and charity, and service, and faith, and thy patience, and thy works; and the last to be more than the first" (Revelation 2:19). Jesus was saying, in essence, "You're more intense now than when you started out. You've allowed my life in you to grow more abundant."

Proverbs echoes this: "The path of the just is as the shining light, that shineth more and more unto the perfect day" (Proverbs 4:18). And Job declares, "The righteous also shall hold on his way, and he that hath clean hands shall be stronger and stronger" (Job 17:9).

We see there is no place for sloth, laziness or stunted growth in the body of Christ. So, how do you feel about your growth in the Lord? Do you see a constant increase of faith, hope, love, giving? If so, how can you measure your growth?

Tragically, many Christians judge their spiritual growth by outward conditions. Of course, most believers claim to live by faith and not by feelings. But in everyday practice, many do measure their spiritual lives by the way they feel. And they're convinced they're not growing spiritually. They attend church regularly, hear God's word preached, read their Bibles, pray diligently. But they feel they're not making any progress. One saint told me, "I should be much more broken in the Lord. I used to weep easily before him, but now I'm not as tender-hearted anymore. I'm simply not growing."

Others judge themselves because they hear many sermons but retain little of them. They worry they're not as intense or zealous for God as they once were.
Let me share with you a few insights about our spiritual growth:


You may be totally oblivious to the tremendous maturing process taking place inside you. Paul likens our spiritual growth to the growth of our bodies. He says our souls are nourished in the same way as our physical joints, muscles and fibers. He calls this being "(increased) with the increase of God" (Colossians 2:19).

Such growth comes from the head. Simply put, as you trust and abide in Christ, a never-ending flow of his life is pumped into your soul. Jesus is a constant life-force in your being, a living stream that never shuts down. Therefore, his life is constantly emanating into yours, even while you're sleeping. He provides a fresh supply to you every day, no matter how you feel on the outside.

How do you think Israel survived forty years in the wilderness? They lived on manna, bread sent from heaven. This "angels' food" had all the nutrients needed to build up the Israelites' immune systems. That's why God's people never contracted any of the diseases of Egypt. All around them, the Canaanites and Philistines were dying of plagues. Yet the whole time, Israel remained immune.

So it is with Christ, our manna today. He's the bread sent to us from heaven. And he builds up our spiritual immune systems against sins of all kinds. We may not see outward signs that this manna is at work in us (just as we don't see our physical bodies' immune systems growing stronger). But God's word promises that all who love Jesus will grow stronger in their spiritual immunity.

Think about it: at times you still may be tempted, but over the years you've found growing power to resist the world's seductions. And you've grown more disgusted with the filth you see around you. You no longer think or talk as the world does. While your coworkers are howling, "It's Friday, party time," you're thinking, "Only two more days till Sunday." That's because you're growing.

Consider the moon and stars. They appear to be fixed, with no sign of movement. Yet these celestial bodies are racing through space at hundreds of miles an hour. So it is with every Christian. We may think our growth is fixed, with no forward motion. But God has given us a covenant promise: "Those that be planted in the house of the Lord shall flourish in the courts of our God" (Psalm 92:13).

Jesus uprooted you from the kingdom of darkness and planted you in the good soil of his kingdom. And now you're drawing nourishment and life from his heavenly soil. Paul writes, "Rooted and built up in him, and stablished in the faith...abounding therein" (Colossians 2:7). The apostle is telling us, "As you abide in Christ, you'll flourish and bloom like a flower budding with life. Jesus' life will burst forth from you."

2. We May Falsely Judge Our Spiritual Growth Because of The Repetition and Boredom Common to All of Life.

Every day, you do things over and over that become boring and repetitious. For example, every weekday you get up at the same hour, eat the same breakfast and make the same drive to your office. You go to the same restaurant for lunch, stop at the same coffee shop on your way home and listen to the same radio station during the drive.

The same can be true of our spiritual lives. On Sunday morning, we go to church and sit in the same seats. We sing the same choruses and hymns. Even our prayers can sound the same. We do the same things over and over. And we're tempted to think, "I'm not doing anything more than I've always done. I read my Bible and pray. I sing in the choir. But there's no variety to it. I've done these same things for years. I'm not growing at all."

What lies your feelings tell you. Such thinking can rob you of God's grace. The fact is, we all face endless repetition in our daily routines. That's just life. The real proof of growth is that we haven't quit. We're still giving ourselves to God's work, day by day, week by week, year by year.

You see, growing in grace doesn't mean doing more or greater things for God. True growth comes in doing the same things over and over, with more heart assurance that we're doing everything for him. It's like learning to write in first grade. You begin with looping circles and lines, forming big letters. But after a while, the letters become smaller and closer together. Eventually, you learn to put words together and finally form sentences. Even though you've been doing the same repetitious things for a long time, you've been writing. The whole time, something worthy was being accomplished.
I'm convinced that spiritual growth occurs more in the repetitive things than it does by jumping from one ministry activity to another. It takes more grace simply to keep going when we're tired, broken, downcast or afflicted than it does when everything is new. You may think you're spiritually dead, going nowhere in the Lord, but most likely you're increasing in Christ every day.

3. We May Measure Our Present Condition by the Wrong Standard.

Conversion experiences are often emotional, because they're brand new and so incredibly special. The change that occurs in our souls is so sudden, it's overwhelming. It's marvelous to be suddenly turned from sin and bondage to a whole new life in Christ.

Our early spiritual growth is like a child learning to walk. It's wonderful and exciting when a baby takes his first steps. Dad and Mom smile, urging him, "Come to us, you can do it." With wobbly legs, he takes two steps, three steps, then down he goes. Immediately he's picked up and praised. His siblings encourage him, "Good boy." He's the center of everyone's attention. And finally, when he makes it across the room, everyone cheers. What an emotional experience it is for him.

But soon that baby is no longer the center of attention. Now whenever he falls, he picks himself up. And he walks all over the house, making messes. He pulls over plants, drags out pots and pans, rips clothes from dresser drawers. And he's disciplined for it all. Suddenly, things aren't so exciting for him anymore. His first steps were charged with laughter and joy. But now, having learned to walk isn't so spectacular or emotional.

Your spiritual growth is similar. When you were a babe in the Lord, you felt God giving you special attention. Every time you fell, he was there to pick you up. Yet, as Paul writes, you're not to remain a child forever. Just as a toddler is taught not to go into the street, you're taught not to walk into spiritual fires. Now whenever you fall, you look around for someone to pick you up, but nobody's there. God is teaching you to stand on his word and walk by faith, and not to crawl like a baby anymore.

Of course, it's possible to grow lukewarm and careless in your faith. Many believers are in such a state. But Jesus' warning about losing our first love isn't meant for you if your heart still yearns after God. The proof you're growing in his grace is that you're concerned about backsliding. That's why you continually examine your heart.

Yet Satan has tripped up many Christians by convincing them they've lost something in the Lord. The fact is, it's a terrible sin to doubt God's love for you and to misjudge your position in Christ by your feelings. Your day-to-day standing with Jesus has nothing to do with your zeal, tears or intensity. It rests on faith alone.

Imagine how lost you'd be if your salvation actually rested on your feelings. Paul urges us, "Forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before" (Philippians 3:13). You're never to rely on past emotional experiences. What matters today is, do you trust his promises to you? Are you ready to partake of his divine nature in a truly biblical way -- not by emotional trips or outward evidences, but by casting yourself on his glorious promises?

"Whereby are given unto us exceeding great and precious promises: that by these ye might be partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world through lust" (2 Peter 1:4). Peter makes it clear: we obtain Christ's nature by appropriating God's covenant promises, and not by any other means.

A minister once boasted to me, "I've finally gotten back to the faith of my youth. I'm praying more, and the Bible is my meat again. God is giving me red-hot messages for my congregation. And once more, I have a great love for the lost. I feel so renewed." Just a few months later, however, this man was back down in the pits again.

God does bring renewals and fresh anointing to our lives. But that's not the food we're to live on. We're to live on a constant faith in his covenant promises. His word is unshakable, no matter how low we may feel. Our Lord will keep his promises to us: "Now unto him that is able to keep you from falling, and to present you faultless before the presence of his glory with exceeding joy" (Jude 24).

There are many evidences of spiritual growth. Let me name just three:

1. When You Find Yourself in A Crisis, You Quickly Run to God for Comfort and Direction.

A sure sign of spiritual growth is that you take every problem and crisis immediately to Jesus. You've learned you have a place to go.
Some Christians are forever in a crisis. Every time you meet them, they tell you another awful complaint: "I'm facing one thing after another. I don't know what to do." They're willing to describe their problem to anyone in the vicinity. But they never take it to Jesus, as if he has nothing to offer them.

Don't misunderstand: I'm not referring to Christians who are going through real, legitimate problems. Every day our ministry receives dozens of letters from saints who are enduring severe suffering. Rather, I'm speaking of the "professional grippers" in the church. They're pros at complaining. As you listen to them, you want to ask, "Is your God dead? Why don't you draw on the resources he's provided you? Don't you know he's made you more than a conqueror?"

How pleasing it is to the Lord when you go to him first with all your cares. You know you have someone who's faithful to see you through.

2. You Depend Less on Outward Signs, Physical Evidences And Inner Voices.

An important sign of maturity is that you no longer challenge God to prove himself to you, with visible evidence or an inner voice. Of course, the Lord does speak to his people. Jesus says his sheep know his voice. But the voice that God uses with his people today is his revealed word. Hebrews declares, "God, who at sundry times and divers manners spake in time past unto the fathers by the prophets, hath in these last days spoken unto us by his Son" (Hebrews 1:1-2).

Moreover, when the Holy Spirit speaks to us, it is to remind us of Jesus' words: "The Comforter, which is the Holy Ghost, whom the Father will send in my name, he shall teach you all things, and bring all things to your remembrance, whatsoever I have said unto you" (John 14:26).

When we rely on inner voices or outward signs to hear from God, we open ourselves to incredible delusion. Let me give you an example. Not long ago, I spoke at two ministers conferences, in Detroit and Indiana. Before we left for these meetings, I told Gwen, "I don't see much evidence that I'm called to speak at these kinds of meetings. If God doesn't show me some kind of proof on this trip, I won't continue. I love preaching at Times Square Church, and that's enough for me. Besides, I hate to travel. The Lord's going to have to speak clearly to me."

In Detroit, God blessed the word I preached. Afterward, several ministers flung themselves on the floor, crying out to God. Yet this wasn't enough evidence for me. Later, in Indianapolis, I prayed beforehand, "Lord, you have to give me clear evidence tonight, or this will be my last meeting. You have to show me that the word you've given me is piercing ministers' hearts."

Guess who heard that prayer, besides the Lord? Satan did. Suddenly, a sweet, holy-sounding voice whispered to me, "David, tonight you're going to witness evidence as never before. You won't have to do anything except stand there. The Holy Spirit will sweep powerfully over the hall and give you proof on all sides." I rejoiced, thinking, "Glory to God, this is wonderful. It's just what I've been praying for."

The Lord anointed me again that night. When I finished preaching, I merely closed my Bible and prayed, "Okay, Lord, now it's your turn. Where's the evidence I'm supposed to see? I'm just going to stand here, as you told me to do."

Nothing happened. After a few minutes, the audience began wondering what I was up to. I assured them, "Please, folks, bear with me. I'm just waiting on the Holy Ghost." Still nothing happened. Eventually, I began to get peeved at God. I decided, "Okay, Lord. I'm taking this as a sign that I'm not to do this kind of speaking anymore."

At that point, I didn't know what to do. So I suggested to the audience, "Why don't we all raise our hands and worship Jesus?" Quietly, everyone began to praise the Lord. And the wonderful, gentle Spirit of God filled the hall.

Suddenly, I felt directed to ask the pastors' wives to come to the altar. I told them, "I want you all to pray for one another." So they held each other's hands and began praying. In an instant, the sweet presence of the Lord fell on those women. They began weeping, sharing, holding each other. God was touching and healing them. Yet there was no thunder and lightning, no supernatural evidence. It was just a quiet, beautiful work of the Holy Spirit.

The next morning, Gwen and I recognized a pastor's wife in the hotel elevator. She was glowing. She told us her life had been changed by the meeting. Soon we began hearing other testimonies from women who'd been...
transformed, and from couples whose marriages had been renewed.

I saw that these wonderful works weren't the powerful evidence I'd been promised. And I quickly realized what the enemy had tried to do. Satan had heard my challenge to God for outward evidence. And he used it to try to prevent me from continuing to stir up pastors. He'd wanted to convince me, "See? God didn't meet your requirements. You have to take this as a sign to quit."

No! God had set before me an open door. And he'd given me the message to preach. I was simply to obey my Lord, trust his word and leave all results to him. He always fulfills everything in his own way, loud or quiet, visible or invisible.

3. You Respond With Grace To All Uprisings of Ethnic Anger and Conflicts.

One of the supreme marks of a mature believer is love for all of lost humankind. Such a Christian shows love equally for Jews and Palestinians, for Bosnians and Serbs, for everyone.

I believe God is in control of all global situations. He's moving things according to his eternal purposes, even bloody crises and uprisings. Right now, the Middle East is poised on the brink of war. Time magazine ran a story in October called "The Bloody Mountain," about the temple mount in Jerusalem. The area comprises 35 acres, on which sits an Arab mosque known as the Golden Dome of the Rock. Palestinians call the mosque the Noble Sanctuary. But Jews believe the land belongs to Israel. Therefore, they see the Dome of the Rock as the "abomination of desolation, spoken of by Daniel the prophet, standing where it ought not" (Mark 13:14).

The Jews are convinced Israel's temple will be rebuilt on the very spot where this mosque now stands. A prominent rabbi, Haim Richman, points to the Dome of the Rock and says, "The temple will be built right here, and nowhere else." Rabbi Richman's researchers have already recreated the priestly garments and utensils needed for worship in this third temple. These include a silver mizrak to collect blood from sacrificial animals, as well as a million-dollar menorah (a golden candlestick).

According to Time, rabbis and mullahs say God has told them the mount will be retaken only by blood. Other reports reveal that Jewish plans have already been finalized to build the third temple. Some observers fear that militant Orthodox Jews may be digging through underground tunnels that Solomon built, in order to blow up the mosque. Meanwhile, Palestinians have declared that Jerusalem will soon be their capital.

Please don't mistake me here -- I don't wish for any violence in the Middle East at all. But the Bible predicts very clearly that there will be a war in Israel. Therefore, we shouldn't be surprised if we wake up one morning to read, "Arab Mosque Destroyed: Egypt, Syria, Iraq, Iran and Jordan All Declare War on Israel."

Even if we see a temporary calm, I believe we're fast approaching such fulfillment of biblical prophecy and Jesus' return. World tensions will arise, with fierce hatreds, bitter fighting, racial uprisings, ethnic slaughter. So, how should we respond as Christians? Are we to love the souls of those Palestinians who dropped stones from atop Jerusalem's Wailing Wall onto praying Jews? Are we to love the Israelis who fired on and killed 2,000 Palestinians? Are we to love the Serbs who slaughtered thousands in the Balkans, and the people of Kosovo who retaliated against the Serbs?

Only a full-grown, mature believer can accept these words of Jesus: "Love your enemies. Pray for those who persecute you and spitefully use you. If your enemy is hungry, feed him." I ask you: can you imagine spending a month in a Palestinian field hospital, nursing and feeding soldiers who want to destroy Israel? Can you keep your prejudices in check as you read inflammatory news reports in the coming days? Will you have the same spirit that was in Christ, who said as he was crucified, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do"?

If you want to walk as Jesus walked, you can't allow your human passions to be inflamed by headlines. Christ died for every lost soul on this earth, including abortion doctors, murderers, rapists, child molesters. Right now, our jails are filled with convicts who have become powerful witnesses of the saving love of Jesus, all because somebody loved them in spite of their sins.

You can know you're growing in grace if you're able to pray for those whom the world hates. As we hear of terrible things happening, we're to stand against every prejudice that rises up in us, and declare, "I take Christ's authority over this. I will love humankind as my Lord did."
Here is the great promise that puts to rest all our feelings of doubt and uncertainty: "Hast thou not heard, that the everlasting God, the Lord, the Creator of the ends of the earth...giveth power to the faint; and to them that have no might he increaseth strength...They that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary; and they shall walk, and not faint" (Isaiah 40:28-31).