

GROWING TOWARD *Spiritual* MATURITY

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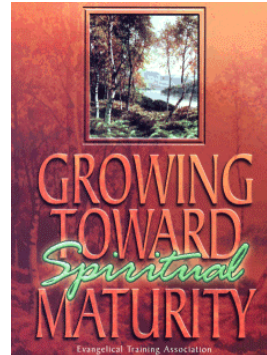
Establishing a Godly Lifestyle

Chapter 6 of *Growing Toward Spiritual Maturity*

By Gary C. Newton

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Christians who want to grow spiritually will impact the world only to the degree they live what they say they believe. Holiness is not an option for the growing Christian. It is a prerequisite for service in the kingdom of God. A pure heart is required for servants of a holy God.



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God does not require moral perfection from His disciples. One only has to look at the heroes of the faith, recorded in Hebrews 11, to see that God uses men and women in spite of their imperfections. The fact, however, that God can use weak and sinful people to accomplish His plans does not give believers an excuse to live in sin. Rather, it should challenge them to get rid of the sin in their lives and press on in the race of faith (Heb. 12:1, 2).

Holiness is not merely living up to some superficial human standard of perfection. Holiness is an attitude of the heart that expresses itself in godly living. A holy, godly lifestyle must first cultivate a heart for God; second, overcome temptations; and third, establish patterns of holy living.

Cultivate a Heart for God

Godliness is an attitude of the heart that radiates itself in godly behavior. The word “heart” throughout Scripture portrays the whole inner life including the mind, emotions, and will. The Holy Spirit desires to fill our hearts with His supernatural presence. As the heart is filled up with God, it overflows into words, actions, and godly behavior.

Open Up to God

God has never been satisfied with superficial service and worship. Such religious activity is futile unless it comes from the heart (Isa. 29:13). God has commanded that His people love Him with their whole beings—heart, mind, soul, and might (Deut. 6:5; Matt. 22:37). In order to do so, believers must allow the Spirit of God to penetrate every area of their inner lives.

Likewise, if we are to continue to grow and mature as Christians, we must allow the Spirit of God to break up the hard areas in our hearts (Jer. 4:3, 4). We must cultivate a tender heart for God.

Confess your Sin to God

Once we have opened up the secret and hidden places of our hearts to God, we must confess specific sins before God (1 John 1:9). The simple, humble confession of sin before God opens the door of forgiveness, healing, and power for the believer. The power of the almighty God is activated in humble hearts, sensitive to the conviction of the Holy Spirit (Isa. 57:15).

To continue to grow spiritually, we must develop the daily practice of examining our heart and actions before God and confessing known sin.

Desire the Fullness of the Holy Spirit

Once a person has dealt ruthlessly with known sin, one needs to fill that emptiness with the fullness of the Holy Spirit. Being filled with the Holy Spirit empowers the Christian for service. The Holy Spirit was given to the church, in part, to empower it to witness (Acts 1:8). Believers are commanded to continue to be filled with the Holy Spirit (Eph. 5:18).

Throughout the Old Testament, believers are compelled to seek God. As the psalmist states: "As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When can I go and meet with God?" (Ps. 42:1, 2).

What was experienced only periodically by people of God in the Old Testament, now is a permanent gift to the church in the New Testament. Jesus, in reference to the gift of the Holy Spirit, quotes Isaiah 44:3, "Streams of living water will flow from within him" (John 7:38). As these and other Scriptures indicate, the Holy Spirit not only fills people's hearts but also flows out into the lives of others. By being filled with the Holy Spirit, believers receive power to witness, reflecting the fullness of God through their lifestyles.

Establishing a godly lifestyle begins with cultivating a heart for God. It demands discipline and perseverance in maintaining a daily time of reflection, Bible study, and prayer. By writing reflections, concerns, and prayers in a journal, the serious follower of Christ can keep accountable to God for personal growth.

Overcome Temptation

Growing Christians are often even more susceptible to temptation than unbelievers. Just because a person is committed to being used by God does not mean they are sheltered from Satan's schemes. It may even mean that Satan will fight harder to bring such a person into temptation. In order to have an exemplary, godly lifestyle, we must learn how to overcome temptation.

There are three practical ways you can overcome temptation: first, admit your weaknesses; second, use God's resources; and third, guard your thought life.

Admit your Weaknesses

Some believers, in an attempt to keep a good image in front of others, act as if they never struggle with sin or temptation. They often feel that if they share their struggles, they will come across as being weak. Yet Scripture reveals a different model of the “ideal Christian.” The power of the Holy Spirit seems to be activated in believers’ lives when they are humbly aware of their own weaknesses. When Christians get too confident and proud, they are more apt to depend on their own talents and abilities and leave God out. To grow spiritually we must be willing to admit our weaknesses, sins, struggles, and failures.

Use God’s Resources

The psalmist makes a direct connection between his weakness and God’s strength in Psalm 73:26: “My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart, and my portion forever.” The power of God is unleashed when we humbly depend on Him for strength in the midst of human weakness. God’s resources are available to overcome temptation. God promises that as we draw near to Him, He will draw closer to us. As we approach God with a humble heart, He promises to give us the needed resources to overcome temptation (James 4:7-10).

In Ephesians 6:10–20, Paul refers to some of God’s resources as the “armor of God.” Defensively he challenges Christian soldiers to protect themselves with truth, righteousness, the message of the gospel of peace, faith, and salvation. Offensively he challenges believers to arm themselves with the Word of God and persistent prayer.

Finally, the growing Christian should wield God’s Word to silence the accusations of Satan and to shed light on the path ahead. Through these resources God makes it possible for us to overcome temptation.

Guard your Thought Life

Sin comes from the heart (Matt. 15:18). Any strategy to overcome temptation must begin with the heart. If a sinful thought or desire is not dealt with immediately, it may lead to sinful behavior. When Christians fall, it usually is because they have allowed sinful thoughts and desires to burn unrestrained in their hearts over a period of time. The way to overcome such temptations is to learn to discipline thoughts.

Paul, in his explanation of how he avoided falling into Satan’s schemes, states that “we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ” (2 Cor. 10:5). In order to continue to grow and mature in Christ, we must guard our hearts from any thought or desire that would violate scriptural principles or laws.

By dealing ruthlessly with sin at the thought level, we dampen the spark that could ignite into a sinful action. At the first indication of a tempting thought, it may help to quote an appropriate Scripture verse or sing a hymn. By drawing our thoughts to God, we will receive deliverance from temptation.

Establishing Patterns of Holy Living

To continue to grow as disciples of Jesus, our lifestyle must be consistent with biblical principles of holiness. While establishing a godly lifestyle begins in the heart, its evidence is seen in daily behavior. Godly actions and deeds spring from a pure heart and disciplined lifestyle. In order to establish patterns of holy living, we must first maintain biblical standards; second, discipline all areas of our life; and third, be accountable to other Christians.

Maintain Biblical Standards

God commands Christians to be holy and blameless in their behavior simply because of the fact that He is holy (1 Pet. 1:15; Lev. 11:44). In order to grow more like Christ, we must strive to be like Him in His holiness.

The standard of holiness must be God's standard—perfect holiness. Rather than adopt the standards of morality practiced in the world or even in the church, the growing Christian must continually seek to live up to God's principles and standards of holiness found in His Word.

The fact that believers will always fall short of God's perfect standard should not discourage us but rather drive us to the cross. There is no need for Christians to feel condemned for falling short of God's standard of holiness (Rom. 8:1). Through the blood of Christ, believers are made holy by an act of God (Gal. 3:2, 3).

Our striving to live up to biblical standards of holiness, however, is not in order to earn God's favor or to appease His wrath but rather as a heartfelt response to His mercy and grace. It is amazing to think that by merely presenting our bodies to God as a living and holy sacrifice, we are "acceptable to God" (Rom. 12:1, 2).

The secret to holy living is not perfection but the total commitment of our whole self to serve God. We must live according to biblical standards of behavior, rather than conform to the standards and lifestyle of the world. As our lifestyle is transformed by the mind of Christ, we will become living examples of God's will—"good and acceptable and perfect." Patterns of holy living will be evidence of such a transformed heart and mind.

Discipline all Areas of your Life

Patterns of holy living do not come without hard work and discipline. Peter states, "His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness." His gift does not, however, deny human responsibility. Throughout 2 Peter 1:2–11, Peter exhorts believers to "make every effort" to do these things. The passage as a whole indicates that if we have truly become partakers of the divine nature of God, we will strive to grow in holiness.

Paul also exhorts believers to discipline themselves for the purpose of godliness (1 Tim. 4:7, 8). Discipline involves hard work. It is not always enjoyable and seldom is it easy. Yet, discipline is absolutely necessary in order to establish patterns of holy living (Heb. 12:11).

To grow spiritually, we must be disciplined in every area of life: social, mental, emotional, physical, and moral. Concerning our social life, we need to carefully evaluate the type of people we allow to influence us. We also need to set goals for ourselves concerning our intellectual

development. This could mean setting up a regular pattern of stimulating reading, enrolling in a continuing education class, or attending a seminar or workshop. We must guard our emotional life so that neither past hurts nor present pressures monopolize our time or energy. Find healthy ways to express emotions through wholesome friendships, recreation, and hobbies. Keeping in shape physically, with a regular exercise program and a healthy diet, has a tremendous effect on both emotional and spiritual health.

Finally, the growing Christian needs to maintain strict discipline in the moral and ethical areas of life. Sexuality, power, and money all pose serious moral temptations to Christians in ministry and must be disciplined according to God's Word. Socially, mentally, emotionally, physically, and morally, we must maintain strict discipline in order to maintain a godly lifestyle.

The most important discipline in our life must be the daily practice of studying God's Word and talking to Him in prayer. One of the greatest spiritual dangers for the Christian worker is to become so preoccupied with outward ministry related activities that the heart grows cold towards God. The result is often a shallow, busy ministry with little evidence of godliness. Following personal reflection, regular fellowship and worship with a body of believers is another mandatory discipline for our growth in holy living. These disciplines must be established in our lives as a basis for ministry to others.

Be Accountable to Godly Christians

Active Christians tend to be lone rangers. They get going so fast, and in so many directions, that they fail to nurture quality relationships with other godly Christians to whom they can be held accountable. They may sweep problems, habits, and sins under the carpet without properly dealing with them. They may ignore certain character weaknesses hoping that God will magically overlook them. By the time some of these individuals seek help, it is too late. Their ministries, families, and relationships may have been severely hurt.

All disciples of Jesus must be accountable, on a deep interpersonal level, to at least one other godly Christian outside their immediate family. These individuals should be people with whom we can confess even the most personal sins and faults (James 5:16) and who are able to encourage us in holy living and stick with us in our "struggle against sin" (Heb. 12:4).

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Summary

Our effectiveness in ministry depends on our ability to live a godly lifestyle. Godliness reproduces itself. In order to establish a godly lifestyle, we must cultivate a heart for God by opening ourselves up, confessing known sin, and allowing God to fill us with the power of the Holy Spirit. Second, we must learn to overcome temptation by admitting weaknesses, using God's resources, and guarding our thought life. Third, we must establish patterns of holy living

by maintaining biblical standards in our lifestyle, disciplining all areas of our life, and being accountable to other godly Christians.

For Further Discussion

1. What are the three steps to establishing a godly lifestyle?
2. Why is it important that you open your heart to God?
3. What is the importance of daily confession of sin?
4. What part does the Holy Spirit play in establishing a godly lifestyle?
5. What are the three ways by which you can overcome temptation?
6. Give several biblical examples of people who were given God's strength in moments of their own physical weakness.
7. Why is the guarding of your thought life important?
8. Why are biblical standards still "the" standards to live by?
9. What importance does discipline play in establishing patterns of holy living?
10. Why is it important to be accountable to other Christians?

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