



10 Questions To Ask To Make Sure You're Still Growing

Are you more like Jesus than you were a year ago?

by Donald S. Whitney

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One of the early explorers to the North Pole charted his journey hourly to ensure that he stayed on course through the white wasteland. At one point a strange phenomenon began to occur. As he checked his position, his instruments indicated that even though he had been moving northward, he was actually farther south than he had been an hour before. Regardless of the speed at which he walked in the direction of the Pole, he continued to get farther from it. Finally he discovered that he had ventured onto an enormous iceberg that was drifting in one direction as he was walking in the other.



Donald Whitney

There is a world of difference between activity and progress. That is as true on a Christian's journey toward the Celestial City of heaven as it is on a North Pole expedition. The Christian life is meant to be one of growth and progress. We are even commanded in 2 Peter 3:18, "But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ." How can we know that we are growing in grace—that we are making real progress and not merely deceiving ourselves with activity?

It's often hard to recognize spiritual advance over a week's time or maybe even a month's time. Trying to determine the progress of a soul is like looking at the growth of an oak—you can't actually see it growing at the moment, but you can compare it to where it was some time ago and see that there has indeed been growth. The following ten questions can help you discern whether you

are maturing spiritually. Use them to evaluate the past six to twelve months.

1. Are you more thirsty for God than ever before?

The writer of Psalm 42:1 said, "As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, O God." Have you been thirsting for God like that? Is He your passion? If so, your soul-thirst is a sign of soul-growth.

Do you yearn to know Jesus Christ more and more intimately? In spite of all of his maturity in Christ, in spite of all he had seen and experienced, the Apostle Paul declared late in life, "I want to know Christ" (Phil. 3:10). What was he talking about? Didn't he already know Jesus better than most of us ever will? Of course he did. But the more he knew Jesus, the more he wanted to know Him. The more Paul progressed in spiritual strength, the more thirsty for God he became.

Is your soul thirsty for the Lord? Do you long to see Him face to face? Like a deer thirsting for water, are you thirsting to be filled and saturated with God? That's a sign of someone who's growing as a Christian.

2. Are you more and more loving?

The mark of a Christian is love, especially love for other Christians. "Dear friends," urged the Apostle John, "let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God" (1 John 4:7). If you are growing in love, you are growing in grace.

I have a friend who, early in his Christian life, quickly and openly expressed his disgust with

individuals and groups who disagreed with him theologically. But as he has grown in grace he has become more gracious. He is less frequently combative and angry with those to the left of his views, especially if they claim to love Christ.

Can you recall recent instances of Christlike love in your life? Have there been occasions when you've sacrificed your own preferences, plans, or rights for those of others? These are mileposts on the journey in grace. Those stalled in selfishness are stuck spiritually.

3. Are you more sensitive to and aware of God than ever before?

The grace of God causes us, who were once dead to God, to be "alive to God in Christ Jesus" (Romans 6:11). One result of this new life is the glorious invasion of our souls by the Holy Spirit of God. His resident presence can give us a sense of being "alive to God" in daily life. What does this look like?

Like a spiritual artesian well, the Holy Spirit frequently brings thoughts of God and the things of God spontaneously to a Christian's mind. Growing Christians find spiritual pleasure in seizing and dwelling upon these thoughts. The Spirit prompts them to see God everywhere—in pink-tinged clouds at sunset, in the warble of a wren, the kindness of a friend, the death of a loved one, even in the timing of a traffic signal.

As you read this, you are bombarded by radio and television signals, cellular phone conversations, and satellite transmissions. Of course, you have been entirely unaware of them, for you aren't built to receive them. Once you are "alive to God," the Spirit makes you alive to God's presence everywhere. Not that you are always sensitive to and aware of God, but if you find yourself noticing and often choosing to enjoy the Spirit's promptings, chances are you're growing spiritually.

4. Are you governed more and more by God's Word?

Before we are made alive to God, we're controlled mostly by what we want. But after we become alive to Him, we have a new desire to be governed by His will. In other words, the true Christian has a new compulsion to do what God wants him to do. And that information is found in the Bible.

A classic text on the sufficiency of Scripture for the Christian is 2 Tim. 3:16-17: "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work." Words like *teaching*, *rebuking*, *correcting*, and *training* are all growth-related words. When you are growing as a child of God, you can regularly point to how the Word of God has been teaching you, how it has reproved you for sin, how it has shown you how to correct mistakes in your life. And you can point to how the Bible has been training you to live in new ways God says are right.

I hear people who are moving forward in the things of God telling me how they are having new insights into the truth of Scripture, how God has used the Bible to give them direction for a career or ministry, how the Lord has reproved them about materialism or family failures or prayerlessness, and how He has corrected them.

Can you point to specific ways the Word of God has been doing this in your life during the past months? If so, you are growing in grace.

5. Are you concerned more and more with the physical and spiritual needs of others?

In Luke 9:11 we read of Jesus encountering a crowd of people, and we're told, "He welcomed them and spoke to them about the kingdom of God, and healed those who needed healing." This was typical of Jesus. He taught them God's truth and then often He would heal or feed them. He was concerned primarily with their spiritual needs but cared deeply about their physical needs, too. The more we become like Jesus the more concerned we will be about the physical and spiritual needs of others.

In my pastoral experience I have observed that the longer a person is a Christian, the less evangelistic he tends to be. This is obviously not a mark of growth or Christlikeness, but of spiritual stagnancy. We must consciously fight this tendency toward "evangelism erosion."

How have you been demonstrating a concern for the physical and spiritual needs of others? Have you shown it through helping to provide for someone's food, clothing, shelter, or health needs? Have you proven it through praying, giving, witnessing, or encouraging?

A sure sign of Christian growth is seeing needs you never saw before and beginning to meet them.

6. Are you more and more concerned with the Church and the Kingdom of God?

When we read Ephes. 5:25—"Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her"—we say that husbands are to grow in their love for their wives toward the model of Christ's love for the Church. But this verse also emphasizes that Jesus loved the Church, the people of God, so much that He died for them. The more we grow to become like Jesus, the more we will love His Church, too. We'll be concerned with our local part of His Church and with the work of His Kingdom as a whole.

Christians who isolate themselves from the Church aren't growing stronger by their isolation. They are like a body part that's separated from the body.

In November of 1970 I tore the cartilage in my left knee during the last high school football game of the year. A doctor at Campbell's Clinic in Memphis put my entire left leg in a cast. I couldn't move it at all, so in a sense my left leg participated very little with the rest of my body. Even though I was at an age when my body was rapidly growing, the muscles in my left leg didn't grow because they weren't involved much with the rest of my body. In fact, those muscles atrophied, and it took a long time to build them back to a healthy condition. In the same way, the more we separate ourselves from participating in the life of the local Body of Christ and working for His Kingdom, the less we will grow.

7. Are the disciplines of the Christian life more and more important to you?

Growth in godliness is ultimately a gift from God, but that doesn't mean there is nothing for us to do. Regarding our role in spiritual growth, God has said in 1 Tim. 4:7 that we are to "discipline [ourselves] for the purpose of godliness" (NASB). As we engage in the spiritual disciplines of the Christian life, the Holy Spirit molds us more into the character of the Master.

Probably the most common reason for the lack of spiritual growth among Christians is inconsistency with the spiritual disciplines. We don't grow

in grace if we fail to use the God-given means for growing in grace.

It's a simple fact: Those who grow the most and the fastest are those who place themselves in the channels of grace such as the intake of God's Word, prayer, worship, service, evangelism, silence, solitude, journaling, learning, fasting, and so on.

8. Are you more and more aware of your sin?

In one of the last things he wrote, when he was about as mature as a Christian gets, the Apostle Paul described himself as the worst sinner in the world (1 Tim. 1:15). How could he say that, since he was probably more like Jesus than anyone we've ever met? It's because the closer you get to Jesus, the more aware you become of your sin and how unlike Him you are.

One of the first spiritual struggles of a new Christian occurs as he becomes aware of sin that never bothered him before. It's not uncommon for a new believer to feel more guilty at times than he ever did before becoming a Christian. That's because he's alive to the Holy Spirit for the first time in his life, and thus he's more aware of sin.

The more you grow as a Christian, the less you will sin. But it often will seem as though you sin more because your sensitivity to sin will be so much greater.

9. Are you more and more willing to forgive others?

Ephes. 4:32 exhorts us to forgive each other "just as in Christ God forgave you." Forgiveness is one of the hardest and most unnatural things we could be asked to do. But the more we become like Jesus, who forgave even those who nailed Him to the cross, the more we will be willing to forgive.

Last week I spoke with a hulk of a man wedged in the soul-vise of bitterness. He adamantly insisted that a mutual friend was not a Christian because of something our friend had done to him. When another man became involved in the same incident, he'd even prayed for God to change the man's mind about it or to kill him. If he doesn't choose to forgive, his bitterness will crush every tender shoot of growth that sprouts in his heart.

Are you still bitter at someone you were bitter toward six months ago? If so, then regardless of all your Christian activities, you have deceived

yourself about having made any real spiritual progress during that time.

Have you forgiven any longtime hurts during the past year? If so, then you have made a measurable advance in Christian maturity.

10. Are you thinking more and more of heaven and of being with the Lord Jesus?

The Apostle Paul wrote to a church needing his help, "I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far; but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body" (Phil. 1:23–24). The more he became like Christ, the more he wanted "to depart and be with Christ"—that is, to be in heaven, for he knew that "is better by far." Do you think like that very often?

Reading Christian biography has taught me that godly men and women think often of heaven and of being with Jesus. If you read one of the world's all-time bestsellers, John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, you'll read the writing of a man obsessed with the Celestial City.

One of the signs of becoming more like Jesus is increasingly wanting to be where He is.

It's a Matter of Direction.

Growth in grace happens intentionally, not automatically. Like the explorer on the iceberg, you can drift away from spiritual progress, but you never drift forward. Without purpose and occasional evaluation, you'll eventually find that, despite your activity, you've been carried away from Christlikeness.

But don't be discouraged by slow spiritual development—as long as you are growing! Direction is more important than speed. The question isn't always how *quickly* are you growing, but rather it is *are you growing?*

Regardless of the measure of your maturity, what is past is past. You can start fresh today. What would God have you do to begin growing?

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