



How to Grow Your Faith

Pastor Ted Cunningham

We're going to jump right in today to a standalone message – *How to Grow Your Faith*. For those who might be feeling sluggish... I know some of you are excited about the New Year's resolutions, but some of us still ate too much at Little Hacienda last night... and that was me. How many of you, with a new year, you can still feel as sluggish January 1 as you did December 31? Just be very honest. Yeah, still a little sluggish.

Today, what we are talking about is a kick start to our faith and how to grow in our faith, and we're going to look at some ways to grow. I want to start by talking to the young people. Nothing brings a parent greater joy than when they watch, when they observe their children living out what they've been taught. And all the parents said... Amen.

We read this in 3 John 1 – ***4 I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in the truth.*** And all the parents said... Amen. What this means, young people, is that you have been taught for years. Mom and Dad have been teaching you, teaching you, teaching you, and as you grow and as you get older, they love watching you do something without being asked. They like seeing an apology to a sibling without prompting that in you. They like a room cleaned because you just can't stand the filth anymore. They are like, *Maybe they are getting it.* All of us are growing in life and we get joy out of this growth, especially when you see it in those you've invested in.

My kids have always worked my book tables at marriage and family events since they were very young. I used to, when they were seven and nine years old... They are thirteen and sixteen now, but when they were seven and nine, we would do customer service training after dinner in our home. I would make them stand up and I would act like the customer. I would show them exactly what I wanted, like how to shake a hand, how to look the customer in the eye, how to say, "How may I help you?" and how to thank them.

I think we called this training Chick-fil-A is what I think the training is called. How many of you have ever left another fast food drive through and had the thought *I wish Chick-fil-A would come over here and train these people how to do this?* Raise your hand and be very honest if you've had that thought. Not to pick on those of you who work at other restaurants, but... Good customer service is a choice. It's a decision that you make. It's the same feeling I get when I'm on American Airline flights. I think *I wish Southwest would come over here and show them how to be happy.* Anyway, sorry if you work for American Airlines.

But I would train my kids. Now they don't get to travel with me as much, but they both have retail jobs here in Branson, at 14 and 16. I love nothing more than to sneak into the Imax and to stand behind a beam or a pillar and look around to see if he is practicing what I taught him. You're like *Isn't that stalking?* A little bit; it's just a little bit. But the joy that fills me up when I see him, without me there, acting on and doing what he was trained years ago. All the parents get this. The joy that we have to watch our children growing in the Lord.

Today, I'm going to have you turn to Hebrews 5. We're going to spend a lot of time in Hebrews today. We're covering a lot of content, a lot of scripture today as we look at five ways to grow. In context, we're in a passage in Hebrews where the writer of Hebrews is writing to them and they are sluggish in their hearing. They are actually lazy in their faith. He wants to teach them deeper truths; he wants to actually teach them specifically about the priesthood of Jesus – Jesus is greater than Moses, greater than the angels. He's wanting to build into that. The problem is they've kind of stalled out. They are kind of stuck.

At the beginning of a new year, it's a time for all of us to reflect and ask that question. Are we stuck; are we stalled out? Have we come to a place in our faith in Christ where we say, "This is as good as it needs to be, I've learned all I need to learn? I think I practice what I've been taught well enough." And maybe we've stopped growing.

In 1 Peter 2, before we get to Hebrews, let's read this. ***2 Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk...*** Your translation may read *desire*. The idea here is to crave this with deep passion, to want it. It's the very first thing we'll learn about spiritual growth today and that is something all of us need to know. It is a decision; it's a choice that we make. We choose to go deeper. ***...so that by it you may grow up in your salvation, 3 now that you have tasted that the Lord is good.***

When you get to Hebrews 5, we read, ***11 We have much to say about this...*** We want to talk to you about the priesthood of Jesus, ***...but it is hard to make it clear to you because you no longer try to understand.*** Here is the idea of sluggish hearing, of just apathetic or lazy practice of our faith. ***12 In fact, though by this time you ought to be teachers...*** He's not speaking here of teachers in a formal sense, standing in front of a large group of people and speaking. He's talking about you should be able to help others along in the faith with what you've learned. The problem is you've stalled out with the elementary truths or the first principles.

...you need someone to teach you the elementary truths... the idea there is the ABCs of the faith or the subtraction and addition tables. Does anybody remember those from fourth grade or multiplication tables? How many of you had a fourth-grade teacher that would not allow you to go to recess until you mastered those... I'm sorry; it still sits with me to this day. I didn't see daylight in fourth grade because I could not master those tables. But I understood that you were not moving on to algebra and geometry and all these other subjects until you get this, until you understand this.

The problem is some of you have stalled out saying, "I don't need to go deeper." What we're going to see in this text is the idea that there is an input and an output. Input is the learning and output is the practice. And maturity comes from practicing truth. Maturity comes from not just listening and not just

hearing and not just taking in information or knowledge; it's about walking it out in everyday life. It's a passion of this church that today's message is something you would talk about with your family today at lunch. That on Wednesday you would maybe be talking to someone at work about this. That you would be practicing, and you would want it in your daily life. Not just learning, learning, learning, but doing something with it. But you're not teaching people because for you, the elementary truths is where you've stalled out **...of God's word all over again. You need milk, not solid food! 13 Anyone who lives on milk, being still an infant...** The idea here, you're going to see this throughout all of scripture, when trials hit you, you get tossed to and fro if you haven't grown up in your faith. **...is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness. 14 But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use...** The practice of living it out in your life. **...have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil.**

Hebrew 6: 1, the very next chapter, says, **1 Therefore...** I love the word *therefore*; it's always in between deep truths of who God is, how he cares for you, theology, his love for you, and then, therefore, this is now what you should do with that. I've used *therefore* parenting with my kids for years. If you've been here for any amount of time, you know it. I remind my kids, "How much does your dad love you?" They say, "You love me this much." This is from the time they were very small. "I love you way more than that. How will I protect you? If a car jumps the curb and is coming at you, I, like Superman, will jump in front of that car. I'll give my life for you kids. Therefore, go clean your room. That's really all I want you to do. That's a practical way for you to show that you are understanding what I have done for you or what I will do for you."

Therefore, let us move beyond, let us grow beyond **the elementary teachings about Christ and be taken forward to maturity...** Maturity is the persistent and consistent practice of truth. **...not laying again the foundation of repentance from acts that lead to death, and of faith in God,**

We all know of times and seasons in our lives where we may have grown sluggish, where our hearing, our living it out... Let this be a year... Some of you are just way more excited about 2020 than you were about 2019. Let this be a new year, let this be a fresh start, let this be an "I am going to grow deeper in my faith, not just learning, but practicing the truths that I know."

Here's the first way that we know that we grow:

1. We grow over time. Now you may have retired to Branson, but you're never supposed stop growing spiritually. You may have retired from a job and you no longer need to study or go to classes or workshops or seminars for a job to get better at a skill for that job, but spiritual maturity, God's divine curriculum for our lives, is until the day we are with Him. We never stop growing.

I love in Psalm 92... This is going to hit all the old people in the room. You're going to be compared to a tree. This is very encouraging. **12 The righteous will flourish like a palm tree...** So, picture a palm tree in En Gedi which was a lush desert oasis. **...they will grow like a cedar of Lebanon...** Strong and tall. **13 ...planted in the house of the Lord, they will flourish in the courts of our God. 14 They will still bear fruit in old age...** And all the old people said... Amen. We never stop bearing fruit.

This text very much correlates with Psalm 1 – ***Blessed is the one who delights in the law of the Lord. Blessed is the one who meditates on the law of the Lord day and night. He will be like a tree planted by streams of water, bearing fruit in season.***

Today, young people have a word and it's a great word, but I want to just add to that word a little bit for you. The word is *impact*. Simon Sinek says that young people today will leave a job after six, seven, or eight months because they don't feel like they are making an impact. He's saying, "Young people, we have to think in a longitudinal way, we have to think in longer periods of time and not give up so quickly on jobs, on marriage, on church, on faith." You're wanting to make an impact; what you're really wanting to do is bear fruit. And you won't bear fruit... No tree bears fruit... Okay, maybe if you get one that's established when you put in your yard but stick with the word picture here. But to plant a brand-new tree and expect fruit in six months is crazy. You have to think in terms of years. You have to give it time. Some of you are giving up on a marriage, a job, a church, a friend or friendship so quickly when if you would just give it time, just push through, it'll bear fruit in season.

... they will stay fresh and green, 15 proclaiming, "The Lord is upright; he is my Rock, and there is no wickedness in him."

When it comes to spiritual growth and growing in your faith in Christ, think in terms of years, not weeks or months. If you want marital satisfaction, I'm telling you... I've talked to couples who are giving up after six months and they say, "It's just not working out." You haven't given it time to work out. At six months, you don't even know each other. You're still learning some things. You're like, "How much time should we give it?" I don't know, like seven... teen years or 27 years. Give it time. Be that old guy sitting on the bench down at The Landing waiting on his wife to come out of a store. He is full of joy. He has no problem sitting there and waiting; he loves it. Like a tree at The Landing... That's what we should call it. Like a tree at The Landing, be the old man on the bench that has grown in time.

Do you see that though? We're giving up so quickly. I'm not against Bible studies. Sometimes people think I am. I'm not. It's the Bible study culture that I get concerned with. I'm not against publishing, but I think publishers had a very difficult time selling Bible studies in years. They had to break it down into chunks of six weeks and eight weeks. But I'm here to tell you that you can take a Bible study called *The Mind of Christ* that's eight weeks long, but don't think of the end of eight weeks that you've nailed it. Some people will say at our church, "We don't offer enough Bible studies." There are two times of the year that we do it. They want more. They think it needs to be ongoing. I just want to encourage you that in-between Bible studies, which is input, go with output. Between this Bible study and this Bible study, practice everything you just learned in the first one because this is where maturity will be found. This is where you will grow. Give it time. Making an impact, yes, but bearing fruit is better. Think in terms of years, not just weeks or months.

Amy and I, our New Year's looks the same every year now that we are 45. We get really ramped up around 7 pm and have some snacks until about 8:00 and then put our pajamas on around 8:15 and have some tea... Listen, old is fun; it really is. And then at 9:00, we pretend it's midnight. How many of you

shared a similar New Year's? That's a great New Year's. But it's always a time for us that we just reflect. One of our reflections this year is just aren't we glad we didn't quit?

You know there have been plenty of times that I've wanted to go fulltime comedy; usually every Monday. Because we've had seasons, dry seasons in this church, difficult seasons in this church, but we're glad, at coming up on 18 years at almost 2 decades, we're in a pretty sweet season. That doesn't mean hard seasons aren't there; we've had some hard seasons, difficult seasons, but we've just looked back and said, "Aren't we grateful that we didn't quit?" Do you know that a lot of couples who give up really soon in a marriage have a regret that they just didn't give it enough time?

Some of you in here are in marriages and you know exactly what we're talking about. You had the season in the marriage you're in right now where you were saying, "If I sit five feet from this guy, I'm going to take him out." You were there, but you're not there anymore. You're sitting right next to him this morning. You worked through it. You're going, "Yeah, I'm glad. Those were some tough years, but we didn't just give it weeks or months; we had a long-haul plan for growth. With marital satisfaction, job satisfaction, you have to remember, when it comes to growth, it tends to be slow and meandering. We have to be embracing that.

2. We grow with others. It's not just time. There is another key, another way we grow. We grow with others. At our church, we want you to know there are really three parts to our discipleship growth track. You're sitting in one right now. It's our Sunday morning gathering. It's where we gather, as we'll see in a second, to spur one another on, to stir one another up toward love and good deeds. It's where we gather. We can realign here on Sunday morning. We worship together, we study together, we open God word, we pray. It is an opportunity for growth. Here's our concern. For some of you, this is it. This is all you get; it's all you take in.

We want to encourage you with two other parts of our discipleship growth tract. The second would be that of self-feeding. So, you have Sunday morning and then you have self-feeding. Back in the 90s, when the church growth movement was really taking off, everything was about Sunday morning and we obviously put a lot into Sunday morning, but what kind of got pushed off into the background or backstage was this idea of people need to leave the Sunday morning gather, spurred on to open up the Bible and study and read and grow for themselves throughout the week.

Sunday morning gathering, self-feeding throughout the week, and then small groups. We have several different types of groups. We have home groups that you can gather with once a week for fellowship and Bible study. We also have discipleship groups, or what we call growth groups, that you can gather with. We have them seasonally: Bible studies, special groups for grief share and divorce care. We have ready to wed for those who are getting married, so we have all different types of groups that people can gather in.

So, there is more. If you are visiting today and you're wondering what else the church has, January is going to be a good time for you to learn about that at our church. Actually, we have a new part of our website that's coming online where you're going to be able to go and pick out a home group. We're

trying to make that as streamline and as easy as possible for you to plug in and grow in your faith because you're not supposed to be an island. You're supposed to grow with others.

We read in Hebrews 10, **24 And let us consider how we may spur one another on...** Your translation may read *stir up*. That's what this gathering should do. That's what your homes groups should do. That's what your growth group should do. It should stir you up. You should leave ready and willing and with a strong desire and a craving **toward love and good deeds, 25 not giving up meeting together...**

You're probably going to see a lot of headlines from the millennial generation to generation Z; we're seeing a lot of articles come out that young people are giving up on church; it's not meeting their need. I'm one pastor who wants to encourage you, this is an important part of your growth track, of your discipleship, of how you grow in the Lord: gathering with other believers. Mom and Dad, make it a priority in your home. Make it a priority for your children.

This morning, I heard Bishop T.D. Jakes. I can't preach like Bishop T.D. Jakes, just in case you were wondering, but I love when he makes a point and stands there so resolute. I want to do that after every point. He walks back and forth. He made a great point this morning. He said, *"Some of you didn't want to be bothered bringing your kids to church because you didn't want to wake them up. They had a long weekend of sports and getting them up early was just too much for you. That was a big mistake, Mom and Dad. Because I'll tell you, I get a lot of moms asking me to write a letter to the judge for their son, who I've never met. You didn't want to inconvenience them to go to church and to gather with other believers. You didn't want to get them up too early, but now someone is going to get them up at 5:00 am, seven days a week, and tell them when to eat."*

I don't usually give illustrations like this but when T.D. Jakes gives it, it has something. And I mean the place was going nuts down there at Potter's House. I thought to myself, *Yeah, we've kind of let the culture say it's just not meeting my needs, I don't want to do it anymore*, but the Bible says don't give up on this. Continue to meet together. You may think you don't need it, but if you will gather and let others to spur you on and to stir you up and you will do self-feeding and you will be in groups, you will grow in your faith. It's got to be something you want, though. Again, it's a choice; it's a decision that you made. Don't give up on this. **...as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.**

Bob Goth says it this way: "We grow where we're loved." Our desire is to be a church... We were so encouraged after last week's mental health panel. So many people encouraged and challenged by the three we had up here. I just loved how you all were leaning into that. So many messages from folks this week from not just here in the community but all over the country who are in a dark place, that cloud that Ryan described and that Pam described; they are in a dark place in their life. They said they were able to take a deep breath. We had spouses messaging me saying, "My husband has struggled with this for years and walked out feeling like..." We want you to know this is a place where you are loved and cared for. We desire that for all. You want to be around others.

I love what Ryan said last week. He goes, "I just have this introverted personality that wants to sit at home and watch football." I love that Ryan was able to say that. He goes, "It's a discipline for me to get

off the couch and go be with people.” For some of you, that’s part of your growth plan. Again, that’s part of the choice you need to make. It seems like a big commitment to be in a home group. It seems like a big commitment to be in a growth group. It seems like a big commitment to come week after week. “Ted, I’m here faithfully every three weeks just take it for what it is.” That you would make it part of your growth.

3. We grow through trials. We’re starting a series next week called, *Promises not Promises*. We’re looking at what God actually promised and what he did not promise. We hear Christians... And this is on social media all the time. Speaking for God, things he never said. It’s exhausting. You’ll hear Christians say, “God doesn’t want me to suffer.” Actually, he promises just the opposite.

So, we grow through trials. In James 1, this is another part of your growth. **2 Consider it pure joy...** For those of you who were here when Gary Smalley was an elder, you know this was his favorite passage and he taught James 1 with cheerleading pom poms. He would go, “Consider it pure joy! Rejoice! Celebrate! *...my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, 3 because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance.* This is a good thing. It’s not something you have to run from; it’s something you can learn through; you can grow through it.

4 Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything. 5 If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you. Some of you have challenges that will be coming your way this year that you don’t even know about yet. When they hit you, your faith may get shaky. Remember, we’ve been talking a lot about this over the last few months as a church. That’s the time to surround yourself with people who chase after hope. It’s your time to surround yourself with people who will spur you on, who will stir you up to love and good deeds, that will help you process it.

I loved it last week when they said be the one that asks permission to speak into someone’s life. When you see someone struggling, when you see someone going through a difficult time, be the person that asks, “Hey, can I share with you? Can I encourage you through the Word of God?” Trials will hit us all. We’re all going to go through difficult seasons. The question is not whether or not we have trials, but whether or not we’ll grow through them.

4. We grow when pruned. I want to spend a little bit of time with this one because this is a tough one, speaking of trees today. This is the time of year when we see two sticks sticking out of the ground called a Crape Myrtle. How many of you look at those and go, *There’s no way that’s coming back, absolutely no way?* How many of you are convinced the Crape Myrtle is dead? I never believe the Crape Myrtle is going to come back. And when someone who knows what they’re doing trims one of those or trims a rosebush, I’m always like, “You just killed it. You just destroyed it. Why would you do that?” But then you realize, no, they just did one of the healthiest things that plant needs or that tree needs. That thing is going to come back beautifully in the spring.

And it’s the same with you and me. We’ve been talking about this. Pruning is not fun; it is not easy; it’s probably one of the hardest things about church life. We have to prune. I think one of the reasons churches get unhealthy and churches don’t grow is because they love starting things. Let’s start this

ministry. Let's start this program. Let's get this activity, this event going. But they never take the time to prune out stuff that needs to be gone, because you can't do it all.

I go to churches all the time that have so much going on with a small group of people because so and so started this ministry ten years ago and it doesn't feel right cutting it. Give it a decent burial, but kill it, get rid of it. What you're doing is pruning the church and making it healthy for the church to grow.

If you are in a business, you know this. Business leaders have to prune all the time. Some of you have said no to a client because that client would take too much energy, energy that you could put with these four others and make more in these four relationships than you do with this one. At some point, you just have to say, "Hey, I can't work with you. You're pruned."

We read this in Hebrews 12: ***1 Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses... We're going to get this word picture of a race and I love it. ...let us throw off everything that hinders...*** that's just the weight. And some of you right now, your growth is hindered, your race is hindered because you're weighted down.

Let me go back to the young people for just a second because this is a nudge that some of you need for 2020 and you can say I said it. I want you to break up with your boyfriend, the bad ones. Some of you know he's a weight that's slowing you down. Some of you need to break up with her because your faith was charging ahead and you were strong in your relationship with the Lord, but you started dating her and you didn't just stop in your race, you started taking steps backwards. The Hebrew term is dump him, dump her. Some are going, "That doesn't sound very Jesus." I have to help people with this. You may be engaged to someone. Engagement is not the same thing as marriage, and you know they are holding you back in your faith. Honestly, stepping back from that relationship...

Someone said to me today, "I'm so glad that at 21 someone told me I don't have to be with him anymore." Some of you are like, "This is a whole other message; you're just opening a can of worms." Relationships can be a weight. We talked about this for months last year, just the pruning of toxic relationships. It's not a first step, absolutely not; we're not encouraging that. It's not a fast process, but if it's keeping you from growing in the Lord, I ask you to take that to Him today.

...and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us... A new year is a great time to see the word picture of a race. You're running; get going after it and ask the hard questions: "Who's holding me back? What or who is weighing me down?" 2 ...fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

We read Gary Thomas' book last year, *When to Walk Away: Finding Freedom from Toxic People*. It's kind of the same idea in Dr. Henry Cloud's book, *Necessary Ending*. Here's what he says: "Getting to the next level always requires ending something, leaving it behind and moving on. Growth itself demands that we move on. Without the ability to end things, people stay stuck, never becoming who they are meant to be." That is a word some of us need today.

For some of you, to take it another direction, if a toxic person has walked out of your life, work, small group, or church in 2019, you now have more time, energy, resources, and capacity to invest in others this year. Take that opportunity.

Somebody came up to me after the first service and said, “I was looking at a job, looking at a job, looking at a job and I just wouldn’t make the move because I didn’t want to quit my current job. But my boss, this week, shut the company down.” And that was the nudge, the necessary ending made for him. Guess what? He’s now applying for that job. I’m not saying this is easy. This can be quite painful. We have new people come to the church all the time; we also have people that leave the church. Not everybody that leaves the church is a bad thing. You understand that. This is hard, but pruning makes us healthy. And, in this church, we focus on health, not growth. We don’t sit around to figure out how we can have more people, but we make sure we’re healthy financially, with staff, with leaders, with programs, and with ministries. What weight do you need to let go of this year?

5. We grow when encouraged. I think that was a big takeaway for me last week. We even shared it at the 8:30 debrief. If you're new to our church, we debrief this message and the whole service between 8:30 and 10:00. We were talking about the tone of what they all shared last week ... The content was great and helpful, but the tone, the care that was given from the three that were on our panel gave so many people hope and encouragement. Can I just encourage you? Be that voice this year for people. Surround yourself with people who will be that voice for you.

Ephesians 4: 29 says, ***29 Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen.***

Hebrews 3: 13 says, ***13 But encourage one another daily... Spurring one another on to love and good deeds, stirring one another up to love and good deeds. ...as long as it is called “Today,” so that none of you may be hardened by sin’s deceitfulness.***

All of us in here, we all have family and friends who remind us on a regular basis of our shortcomings, imperfections, inabilities, and enemies. Don’t you love those people in your life. And some of it is well-intentioned. There are some of you who will come in right before a service and mention somebody and it will be followed up with, “You know so and so; they hate you.” “Oh, well, thank you for that right before... I’m encouraged. I already knew it, but I needed that reminder today to make sure that I’m ready to go.”

Some of you are going back to college, high school, and junior high this week. Don’t be that classmate that goes up to other classmates to remind them who all in the class hates them. Don’t be that person. When someone makes a mistake, don’t be the person that’s always throwing that at them. If you are going to be an encourager, be the one who reminds people of their values, strengths, abilities, and friends. Be that person. Be the encourager. Spiritual growth takes times, it takes others who are encouraging us, it takes that pruning, it takes trials. And all of us, as we take on this year, if you’ll just take something out of today to say, “Okay, I’m going to allow the Lord to work on me in that area. I’m going to allow the Holy Spirit to call me by name. What weight do I need to get rid of? Who do I need to encourage? Who do I need to surround myself with who will encourage me? Am I giving up on this too

soon; do I need to give it more time so that I can be planted by streams of water, bearing fruit in season?"

I'm going to invite you to stand as we close. As we end every first Sunday of the month, we take an offering called the mercy offering. It's to meet the physical needs of all of those in our church family. We're running a little late, so if you would leave quickly... We love you but get in your car and go. Remember, you only have to let one car in line to be like Jesus. That's what we say at this church. You don't need to let four cars in. I know you're leaving church. Wave at all the 11:30 people coming in. Let's pray. Be generous in the mercy offering.

Father, in the name of Jesus, we thank you for a new year and a fresh start for us. We pray for those in here who have never placed faith in Jesus that today would be the day they confess with their mouth and believe in their heart that Jesus is Lord and that he has been raised from the dead that they would be saved.

I am just grateful for all you continue to do in our church. Use Woodland Hills Family Church in this community and in the lives of all who gather, and we are grateful for it. Bless the mercy offering that many families would be helped during what can be a very challenging time of year in our community.

We pray all of this in the name of Jesus and everyone agreed and said... Amen.