

# How God Makes Men: The Principle of Spiritual Growth

*Selected*

Good morning, men! I want you to know that being with you men on Friday mornings is the high point of my week in terms of what I do outside of my family. I really do love being here with you on Friday mornings and opening God's word just to see what God has to say that might be practical, applicable and grace based for us. This is a grace based, application oriented Bible Study. In other words, we're trying to break down the Bible and show how we can actually use it in our lives today. We always have room for one more man.

We have two missions here. One is becoming disciples, and the other is making disciples. The series that we're doing is *How God Makes Men*, but first let's do a shout out. Today it goes to a group that has no name but there are 33 guys who are meeting once a month on Saturday mornings at 8:00 am. They've been meeting for about a year. When they are not meeting once a month, they do the videos individually themselves. Don Mullinax is actually the one that brought this group to my attention, but Jim Brook is the leader. They belong to First Christian Church of Kissimmee in Kissimmee, FL. So I wonder if you would join me in giving these men a very warm welcome to the Man in the Mirror Men's Bible Study? One, two, three, hoorah! Welcome guys, we're glad to have you with us!

You know, with the text that we're working with, I'm always looking for what is the compelling problem that my men are facing that this text addresses. Today, every man who will come to this Bible Study is coming because you would like to grow spiritually. You would like to become spiritually mature or you wouldn't be here! But you know and I know that there is resistance, that every time you go to take a step towards spiritual growth, you are met with resistance that is sometimes overwhelming! The question that I want us to look at this morning is what is it that men who are growing spiritually doing differently than men who are not? Here's my promise to you, by the end of this talk I'm going to help you identify the one thing that will most help accelerate your spiritual growth.

## **Why Some Men Thrive While Others Are Stagnant**

The title of today's talk is The Principle of Spiritual Growth, and we'll start this off by looking at why some men thrive while others are stagnant. I'm thinking of a man who is part of this study. It might be you. This is a man who is on a mission from God, he has a sense of his identity, who he is. He has a sense of his destiny, his purpose. He's a man on a mission. Part of that mission is loving God with all of his heart, soul, mind, and strength. Also neighbor love, he's active in building relationships with other people and expressing the love of Christ in those relationships. He is a man who is abiding in Christ on a regular basis. He's figured out how to remain or make his home with Christ as we have heard from the Peterson paraphrase, the message. He's making his home with Jesus, and he is walking in the power of the Holy Spirit, he understands the principle. He understands the means by which he can find God's will. These are all things that we've been talking about! He is driving in his faith, it is robust and he is growing every day. He is joyful even in the midst of hard times, of which there are many, because the closer you get to Jesus, the more you pursue Jesus, and the more aware you become of your sin, ironically. The less close you are to Christ, the less aware you are of your sinfulness. The closer you come to Jesus, the more

aware you become of your brokenness, your fallibility, your sinfulness, and how much you fail. That's why some men thrive, because they do those principles.

There is a man, hopefully not at this Bible Study, but somewhere out there, who is stagnant. He is stagnant in his faith. He is stagnant maybe because he has plateaued. Maybe he has acquired all the religious skills he thinks he needs to get along and he has checked out. He's stopped growing. He says I have enough to get by, so he's coasting. Maybe he is stagnant because he wanted the best of both worlds? He wants the best of what Jesus has to offer without denying himself. He wants to have the best of Christ and the Christian life without forsaking the world, to have his cake and eat it, too. Like Tom, who doesn't go to this Bible Study. But when I travel, as I often do, men will regularly come up to me after I've spoken. It's usually the last guy. I try to talk to everyone who wants to talk. What I've found is no guy will hang around for more than 30 minutes, but there's always one guy at the very end who is hanging back. He's living in shame, often filled with guilt. Always stagnant, and frequently divided. Sometimes plateaued, generally coasting, and his life is falling apart, and he wants to talk. Why? Because he hates it! Nobody wants to feel like that! So Tom was that guy one day in Nashville. He came up and you could tell by his body language that he was in trouble. His posture was sagging, his face was filled with the hollow, vacant emotions of somebody who was in a crisis. So I said what's your name? He said Tom. I said Tom what's going on? He began to unfold this unbelievable story of having wanted the best of both worlds as a Christian, and getting himself into such financial trouble that it looked like he would lose everything. This had been going on for a couple years, and as a result of that, all the little fracture lines that had been building up in the marriage had been exposed, and it was like a big wrecking ball on his marriage. It was about to fall apart, and so he was about to lose everything he ever worked for, his family and his career.

So why do some men thrive while other men become stagnant? What's the difference between these two men? I said to Tom after listening for several minutes to this story of despair, let me ask you a couple of questions. The first question is do you have a time where you regularly read God's word for yourself? As if his posture was not already sagging, it was like his chin dropped to his chest and he mumbled no. Second question, are you part of a small group of guys or do you have a best friend? Somebody that you're doing your life with? Again he said no, I've just withdrawn from people.

One leader that we know was telling me that he has a small group of men studying one of my books. He said it's interesting because the men who read the chapter and come to our weekly meeting prepared to talk are growing. The men who don't read the chapter come to the group and their lives are stagnant and they can't figure out why! Why are some men thriving while other men are stagnant? This is the difference, it's the Big Idea today: **The spiritual disciplines are what differentiate men who are growing from those who are not.**

### **How God Grows Men**

Let's talk a little bit about how God grows men. There's a little warning in Hebrews 5:11, it says:

We have much to say about this, but it is hard to make it clear to you because you no longer try to understand. In fact, though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God's word all over again. You need milk, not solid food!

I don't think this is said in anger. I think this is said with a heavy heart:

Anyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness. But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil.

Men who are growing the way God grows men have a basic understanding that we are in a battle, that we are in a fight. We are aliens, strangers in this world. Pilgrims passing through. This is a book by J.C. Ryle who is both an Eaton and an Oxford graduate. He lived in the 1800s, and he was a special preacher at Cambridge and Oxford, then a bishop. He wrote this book called *Holiness*. I have a shelf where I keep my top 50 books, the ones I keep referring to over and over. This is one of them. In his book, Ryle is talking about the sanctification that must necessarily accompany salvation. He was trying to make some corrections to the theological errors he saw in his day. He had seven summary things. I made up a one page summary of it. I also made up a mind map of it, too, with all kinds of little circles and things. These are the seven main conclusions that I took away from his book.

It is not wise to speak of personal faith without exertion. It requires some effort.

Second, it is not wise to make little of the many practical examples of holiness in daily life.

Third, it is not wise to press on Christians a standard of holiness which is not obtainable in this world. Be holy but not too holy, in other words.

Fourth, and this is interesting because he has this big deal about the seventh chapter of Romans. What I don't want to do, I do. Who will deliver me from the body and so on. He explains that the seventh chapter of Romans is the experience of an advanced believer, because it is a battle, a fight. Your spirituality, your growth, is being fiercely contested!

Fifth, Christ in us means by his spirit.

Sixth, it is not wise to draw a line of separation between conversion and consecration, or what he calls a higher life. It is not wise to separate salvation from the pursuit of your sanctification, of this higher life walking in the holiness of God.

Seventh, it is not wise to teach believers to not fight and struggle against sin as opposed to the thought of just yield to God. No! Fight! Fight for your faith!

So those are the thoughts of J. C. Ryle. When you think about how God makes men, he paints men against the backdrop of this huge battle that we are in.

Let's look at God's part and our part briefly. Turn with me to Philippians 1. Verse 6:

... being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.

God's part is that he is going to bring you to spiritual maturity in Christ. You will become more like Jesus Christ, you will be transformed, because God, who began this good work in you will carry it on to completion, even if you think that you've walked away from him. There are many, millions of younger Christians, who have walked away from God and the Church and think that they have left it behind. No! They have not left that behind, they are prodigals. They will be coming back because he who began a

good work in your will carry it on to completion, and if that's not true, I'm sleeping in tomorrow morning! There are too many people who are struggling with their faith for us to think that God would abandon these people! What heresy! What an affront to the omnipotence of God! To the love of God! What an affront to say that his word is not true and that my experience tells me that these people are now gone! Philippians 2:13:

... for it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose.

In other words, it is God who gives you the desire and power to do his good will. We're talking about God's part in how God grows men. He's going to carry it on to completion, he's going to give you the desire and the power. Keep your finger in Philippians and turn to 2 Timothy 3:16:

All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.

So God has given us this word of his to make men, to help men grow. Psalm 127:1, unless the Lord builds the house, he who labors labors in vain! But presupposed in this is that the laborer is laboring, it's just not in vain when he depends on the Lord to do the laboring.

So what's our part? Philippians 2:12:

Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed—not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence—continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling ...

That's our part, we continue to work out our salvation with fear and trembling. It's a fight! It's a battle! It requires effort! But God is at work in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure. This is the mystery of the sovereignty of God and human responsibility working together. 2 Timothy 3 drop to 14:

But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it, and how from infancy you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.

You put forth the effort but God has breathed truth in to these scriptures. Our part, 2 Corinthians 10:5, we demolish arguments and every pretention that set's itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ. There are many more, you'll find them in the questions later.

What is the labor we can do so that we do not labor in vain? The Big Idea today is this: **The spiritual disciplines are what differentiate men who are growing from those who are not.** What can those of us who labor do so that we do not labor in vain? It would be the spiritual disciplines. Yes! What I'd like to do is give you seven disciplines that in my opinion most differentiate growing men. You will find overlap between things that help you abide in Christ, the means of finding God's will, etc. But these are worth taking a look at.

## **Seven Disciplines That Most Differentiate Growing Men**

### **1. Private Devotions**

Putting on the armor of God. Joshua 1:8 meditate on this law day and night, don't let it depart from you and you will be prosperous and successful in whatever you do.

There were some executives from J. C. Penny's that went to visit the executives from Nordstrom. Nordstrom has this incredible reputation for being this premier retailer and the J. C. Penny's executives wanted to know how they did it. So they sat down and after an appropriate time of small talk one of the J. C. Penny's executives said to one of the Nordstrom executives how do you do it? How are you so successful? The Nordstrom executives looked at each other a little nervously, and then without a word one of them got up and went to the other room and he came back with this big book and he laid it down on the table. He said this book is a hundred years old. He said the secret to Nordstrom's success is that we do everything it says in this book. The book was an original operating manual for J. C. Penny's. So do your private devotions! Be in the word, pray, worship the Lord.

## **2. A Paul (or two)**

Men who are growing have a Paul or two. Mentors, men who know more about the spiritual life than them that they can go to and get advice. Men who they can watch. I've had Pauls that I've not had relationships with but have been able to watch the example of, others are men that I was able to ask questions of. Then there was Jim Gillian who actually allowed me to be in his small group. He saw something in me that I never saw in myself. He spoke words into my life that I never heard. He helped me envision being a Godly man, a Godly husband and a Godly father. He believed in me when I didn't believe in myself and all that released something inside me. It unchained me! I believe that one of the most powerful differentiating disciplines between men who are going to grow or not is that they have a Paul or two.

## **3. A Life-on-Life Small Group**

Hopefully your small groups here are developing like that. If you just come here and sit and then leave, that's not life on life. Caring about each other, getting to know you enough that I care about what's going on in your life. There are different levels of caring. I don't care about you as much as I care about my granddaughter. Sorry! But I care! Doing life on life with some other guys! This is so important!

## **4. Pray With/For Wife**

We've talked about this so many times, but easily the biggest problem men face in this day and age is that marriages are not working the way that they're supposed to. You've heard me say this before, if you take all of the problems of men and you put the marriage problem in one stack and all of the other problems in another stack, the marriage problem alone is the biggest. How do we deal with this? Why have I been married for 41 years and love my wife more today than the day we got married? It's because one of the big reasons is we have developed intimacy, so when I say pray with and for your wife, that's not what does it exactly. Perhaps partially, but what it does is that it's evidence that something else is going on in that relationship. So pray with and for your wife.

My wife doesn't usually like to pray, so I'm the one to do it. We pray twice a day, in the morning for the day for a couple minutes. I'm not saying setup a séance with candles and what not. Just a couple minutes a day, and then we say a blessing over dinner. We pray for our families and the things that are meaningful to us.

## 5. Tithe

I have never known a man who tithed that was spiritually unhappy. I have known countless men who've robbed God (that's Malachi 3 by the way) of his tithe and are miserable. I can't afford to tithe! I'm making too much money to tithe! Do you realize what would happen if I would tithe? That'd be a lot of money! You can't afford NOT to tithe! I'm too poor, I can't afford it. Why do you think you're poor?

## 6. Attend Church

I don't know which of these I want to drive home more! It's going to be different for every one of you! The promise was that I would show you the one thing that you can do that would most accelerate your spiritual growth, but it's going to be different for everybody, and it may not even be on the list. But attend church! Oh my goodness! We had a table leader here once who didn't attend church! It's on the job description! Here's why. We had a leader who didn't attend church. His daughter gets pregnant, the other one runs away. In working with him and trying to figure out what was going on, he was using this as his church! He didn't have his family in church! What do you expect to happen? Attend church!

One day a pastor dropped by to visit a man who used to be a regular church attender but hadn't been in many weeks. He knocked on the door and when the parishioner greeted him he knew why he was there. He welcomed him warmly and invited him in. The pastor sat in a comfortable chair by a roaring fire, didn't say a word. After what seemed like a very long time, the pastor went to the fire, took the thongs and grabbed one of the logs and laid it on the hearth. The log's flame flickered and then extinguished. It wasn't too long before it was a cold, lonely log. Then after many more minutes he picked up the log and put it back on the fire. Guess what happened? It roared back to life instantly! The pastor still hadn't said a word. He walked to the door, turned to say good bye and his parishioner said I appreciate this fiery sermon you have preached to me tonight and I can assure you that I will be in church on Sunday.

## 7. A Disciple-Making Ministry

Come back next week and we'll talk about this one. The Big Idea today: **The spiritual disciplines are what differentiate men who are growing from those who are not.** Let's pray!

### Closing Prayer

Our dearest Father, thank you so much for giving us the privilege of causality, that it's not just something you do for us, but something we do for you. We make a contribution, we work for our growth and therefore it's so much more meaningful and so much more precious to us. Father, I pray that any man who may, for whatever reason, be stagnant, that he would hear what he needs to hear in this message and that you would show him that one thing that would most accelerate his spiritual growth, and that he would seize the day and fight the good fight. In Jesus' name we pray, amen!