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**Grace Fellowship Church, Port Jervis, New York**

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**Growth of a Kingdom Citizen**

**2 Peter 1:5-9**

**Prayer:** *Father, again, we just thank you for this place, we thank you for giving us the gift of your Son, the gift of your word, the gift of your Holy Spirit. And Lord, this morning as we come together to unpack as it were some of those gifts, we pray that we would have the presence of your Holy Spirit. Father, guide us, direct us, empower us, and make this of lasting value, we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.*

Well, we have been looking at the kingdom of God, and so far we've looked at what the kingdom is, we've looked at what the kingdom citizen does, what their motivation is in becoming a kingdom citizen, and today we want to look at part four and that is how kingdom citizens grow.

Our text this morning is taken from 2 Peter 1:5-9. It says this: *For this very reason, make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue, and virtue with knowledge, and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with steadfastness, and*

*steadfastness with godliness, and godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love. For if these qualities are yours and are increasing, they keep you from being ineffective or unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. For whoever lacks these qualities is so nearsighted that he is blind, having forgotten that he was cleansed from his former sins.*

This is God's vision of a mature Christian, of a fully grown Christian. This is a man or a woman who is full of virtue, full of goodness, someone who knows who their God is and how his kingdom works. He or she is a person who has mastered his impulses, one who has been tested and tried and knows that God is trustworthy. He or she is godly and kind and loving, effective and fruitful. Is that you? Can you think of anyone who fits that description? Better yet, would you like to be the someone who fits that description? You know, you can get there. If you are a citizen of the kingdom of God you've been empowered by the Holy Spirit to have that description accurately fit you. Actually lives like Peter is describing should be the rule for believers and not the exception, but I think we all know that they're pretty much not. And that's because between the ideal believer and the real one we all know lies the world, the flesh, the devil. And each has their own method for stopping or stunting our growth. And perhaps worst of

all is the assumption that growth as a kingdom citizen is automatic and somehow is painless. You know you get saved and you find a church and you maybe start listening to Christian radio and presto chango! You suddenly become a mature, effective believer. Folks, it just doesn't work that way. In fact it reminds me of the fruit tree catalogs I used to get in the mail. For a while I was a very big fruit tree enthusiast. I had peaches and plums and pears and apple trees and I remember getting the catalogs and I see these amazing pictures of fruit. So I bit and I bought a few of those trees and I dug some holes in the ground and planted them and pretty much forgot about those first fruit trees, and what do you know, all I eventually got out of those poor rundown fruit trees was some wormy, shriveled fruit. See, it took me awhile to realize but I eventually came to the understanding that fruit trees will produce fruit in direct proportion to the amount of work that you put into raising them. I mean if you prune and you fertilize and you cultivate and do all the other things that you're supposed to do, you'll raise a bumper crop of amazing fruit. But if you think it's going to happen automatically, you're going to get fruit but it's going to be fruit no one's going to want to eat.

There's a direct correlation between growing fruit trees and growing the fruit of the Spirit, and it's in the one area of Christian living that folks have a very tough time with, and it all

has to do with this four-letter word W-O-R-K. Work. You see our lives bear fruit in direct proportion to the kingdom work that we're willing to put into them. For many evangelicals it's almost heretical to speak of working or labor or effort in regard to our salvation. So let me be very clear here. There is no amount of labor, no matter how glorified, that will ever save us. Every one of us was born condemned already by the sin of Adam, the original sin that made every one of us flawed, fallen and unqualified for fellowship with God. So God himself became a man and lived a perfect life so that he could ransom and rescue us. He went to the cross in order to exchange his life of perfection for our life of sin so that we by faith could stand before God now clothed in his righteousness instead of our own. And so we're saved, we're redeemed from the curse that condemned all of us by grace and grace alone. But as Martin Luther said, we are saved by grace alone by a grace that is never alone. It's always accompanied by works. As Bible-believing Christians, though, we absolutely reject a gospel that says that those works are what save us. *Galatians 2:16* says: *We know that a person is not justified by works of the law, but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified.* So we categorically reject the gospel of works but the opposite of that gospel is not the gospel of play, it's not the gospel of

indifference or the gospel of laziness. I mean God will never accept our own efforts as payment for sin but he never, never intended for us to twist the gospel into an effortless process of just waiting around for him to do something.

Our text this morning contains three words that are almost antithetical to many evangelicals, it's those words "make every effort." *"Make every effort to add to your faith."* You say, well, wait a minute. I thought we were saved by faith alone, I mean Abraham believed God, it was credited to him as righteousness; isn't that what Romans 4:3 says? But Peter isn't speaking about salvation here. He's actually speaking about sanctification. He's speaking about what we do with the gift of salvation that God gives us. And you know you can accept the gift, you can accept it and make almost no effort to add anything to it, and there are many who do just that. Peter says you will reap what you will sow. And he talks about those Christians by claiming that they are -- quote -- *"ineffective or unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ."* Peter goes on to describe them as nearsighted and blind -- quote -- *"having forgotten that they've been cleansed from past sins."*

Now some folks might look at that description and say, okay, this person is ineffective, he's unfruitful, he's nearsighted and blind,

that doesn't mean he's not saved. I mean after all Peter does say in verse 9: *For whoever lacks these qualities is so nearsighted that he is blind, having forgotten that he was cleansed from his former sins.* You see, ineffective and unproductive Christians don't necessarily lose their salvation, in fact they can't because God has told us repeatedly that he loses none of those whom he has chosen, but there are folks who will enter into heaven by the skin of their teeth. *1 Corinthians 3* says: *For no one can lay a foundation other than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ.* Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw -- each one's work will become manifest, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed by fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done. If the work that anyone has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward. If anyone's work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire. Paul is saying there are believers whose life work is built on wood, hay and straw instead of gold, silver and precious stones and they will enter heaven, but they'll enter only with a heap of ashes to show for their life. I mean is that what you and I want? And there's something else that they lose if they move in that direction, they lose their ability to be certain that they ever had the gift of salvation in the first place. And again that's by design. I mean there may well be people who enter the

kingdom of God -- quote -- "*but only as through fire,*" and that may be you, but the question is are you willing to take that risk? I mean if your life doesn't demonstrate any type of sanctification or growing in Christ likeness, then you've got no reason to believe that you're saved, that you've been reborn. You see genuinely reborn creatures, they always grow. And if they don't grow there's really only two reasons. Reason number one is they are sick; reason number two is they are not the creatures that they thought they were. In fact in the very next verse in Peter's description of a mature believer, he says in *verse 10: Make your calling and election sure.* I mean if you are ineffective, unproductive, nearsighted and blind, you have no reason to be sure of your salvation. I mean you just might be an ineffective believer. But you also may be an unbeliever, someone deceived by a bankrupt evangelical culture that tells you all you need to do is make a decision, and neither of those are good places to be.

So this morning we want to look at three areas that define the where, the why, and the how of how we are to grow in Christ as kingdom citizens. The where is our destination. What do we aim at when we seek to grow in Christ? The why is our desire, not for joining the kingdom, I mean we looked at that last week and we decided that it's really joy, it's the joy of discovering buried treasure, that's our motivation for joining the kingdom. Now we

want to look at what is our motivation for wanting to grow as kingdom citizens. How do we grow our desire to match that of our Lord's. And finally we want to look at the how, and that is our discipline. How do we get where we want to go? Our destination, our desires and our discipline, that's how we make every effort to add to our faith.

And so first we ask, okay, what is our destination? What do you aim at when you aim at Christ? In what direction do you point your life? Tim Keller has observed that Christian growth is divided into two basic categories which he describes as the mechanically ethical versus the organic. It's the difference between the growth of a snowball and the growth of a peach. You know, roll a snowball down a hill and you'll see that snowball will grow, it picks up layer upon layer of snow and it can get very impressive, but its growth is in itself a lifeless process. It's simply adding layer upon layer of cold, lifeless style and no one in their right mind would compare the growth of a snowball to a growth of some kind of seed or pit, say a peach pit. I mean you put a peach pit in the ground and it grows as well, but the difference is its growth is not lifeless. As it grows it also grows in its capacity for more growth. You put a peach in the ground, put a pit in the ground and first it will grow a shoot then the shoot will start to grow leaves and the leaves will take in sunlight and start to get that energy



and they'll make more shoots and more leaves, taking in more energy so that the peach can grow and produce fruit. You see it's growing from a seed that is constantly expanding in its capacity to grow. Now a snowball just sits there until it eventually melts. Snowball growth is caused by adding layer upon layer of rules and standards without any organic connection to Christ as the source of that growth. I mean it produces a mechanically ethical behavior that the world dismisses as smug, as self-righteous.

I remember a ways back I was on a job, I was having a conversation with a carpenter and he was telling me how he got this repair part for his new trampoline. He explained how he told the perfect lie to get the company to send him the part for free. Now a snowball Christian response would be to tell that person, we don't lie like that. We're Christians. I mean you may not say it like that but we certainly do think that. You see what you think or say may well be true, it may be ethical, but it's cold, it's mechanically ethical. And it's almost impossible to avoid feeling superior in that feeling. I would never lie to get a free part. And to be sure, lying like that is wrong, I mean, it's unethical, it's sinful but to focus on that alone is like focusing on a drowning man getting his tie wet. I mean the problem is much, much bigger than simple ethics. I mean this unethical behavior is a big hint that this man is needy and the chances are good that he doesn't have a

connection with the living God, something that would make those kind of lies just out of the question. Well, snowball growth, that is adding layer upon layer of ethical behavior makes it very hard to see beyond the obvious. I mean it misses the real issues because it's only looking at the surface. It's what the Pharisees did.

Listen to Jesus' words to the Pharisees in *Mark 7*. He says: *And he said to them, "You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to establish your tradition! For Moses said, 'Honor your father and your mother'; and, 'Whoever reviles father or mother must surely die.' But you say, 'If a man tells his father or his mother, "Whatever you would have gained from me is Corban"' (that is, given to God) -- then you no longer permit him to do anything for his father or mother, thus making void the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down. And many such things you do."* You see the Pharisees had mechanical ethics down to such a fine point that they actually felt proud in denying a needy parent. I mean they just took a resource that a parent might need and labeled it Corban or set apart for God, hence they used God to deny their own parents their resources. Jesus added -- quote -- *"And many such things you do."* I mean, you might wonder how somebody could be so moralistically depraved and I'll tell you the way it works. I'll tell you the way it always works. It works

incrementally. It works in tiny little steps and it succeeds incrementally by not catching your attitude before it grows to monstrous properties like it did with the Pharisees. See the real danger in snowball growth is what lies under the surface, why we do the good things that you do and avoid those bad things. And again, Keller says the mechanically ethical person does what he does not for the love of God but for one of three reasons: Number one, so others will respect me; number two, so I will respect myself; or three, so that God will bless me. So you have to ask yourself is that why I live the Christian life? And if it is, you need to shift your focus.

You see, our growth is not about snowballs, it's far more about seeds. In fact Peter said in *1 Peter 1*, he said: *You have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God;* And again, just picture a peach pit that's put into the ground. Its growth is always one of expanded capacity. The more it grows, the more capable it becomes of even more growth. That's precisely what God wants for us, but he wants the direction for that growth not to be aimed at ethical superiority, he wants him to be aimed at Christ-likeness. The practical difference is this: You see ethical superiority, that is a reachable goal, just ask any of the Pharisees, they'll tell you. But Christ-likeness, actually bearing the living image of Jesus

Christ, is an absolutely impossible task when done on our own. And that's God's intent. I mean just look at all of the stuff that Peter is exhorting us to add to our faith: Goodness and knowledge, self-control, perseverance and godliness, kindness and love. These are all qualities that the Lord Jesus Christ possessed to the maximum. And we get those qualities just like we get the fruit of the Spirit, by going after the source of those qualities rather than the qualities themselves, and the source is Christ himself.

See, you can choose either of two destinations to aim your life toward. You can aim your life at the stuff itself or you can aim your life at the source of the stuff. Aim your life at the stuff and you'll grow like a snowball. Aim your life at the source of the stuff and you'll grow like a seed, ever expanding into the capacity to grow by the indwelling power of the Holy Spirit. But here's the dangerous part: You get to choose. This is really your choice. I mean I've said it many, many times, the enemy has a playbook for any kind of situation you can think of and I guarantee you he's got one labeled "evangelicals." And all it takes to become a pharisaical snowball is an unwillingness to do the work that it takes to add to your faith by aiming, aiming at Christ.

The second point is the why. What is my motivation? Where does my desire for growth come from, and why do I want to grow as a

Christian? I mean is there something more than Tim Keller's list of three short-sighted reasons, so others will respect me, so I will respect myself, so that God will bless me, and the answer is yes. The simplest way that I can describe my desire to grow is this: I want to be hungry for God. I want to grow in my capacity to hunger not for anything that this world has to offer but for Christ alone. I want single-minded clarity in the pursuit of God and his kingdom. And the amazing thing, the astounding thing, the thing that the universe just looks on us with feelings of pity at our foolishness thing is that God promises us is that if we do this one thing, that is seek him first in everything, then every other aspect of our life will fall into place. He says: *"Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you."* So are you hungry for God? If you're hungry then the joy that brings you into the kingdom in the first place will mark the way you grow in the kingdom.

Romans 5 speaks to how we grow our relationship with God through Christ. It's a wonderful section right at the very beginning of Romans 5. In that section the word "rejoice" appears three times in the first eleven verses. *Romans 5:2* says: *Through him we also have obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God.* The very next verse, verse 3 says: *Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings,*

*knowing that suffering produces endurance. And then verse 11 says: More than that, we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.* Pastor Ray Stedman observed those three verses encapsulate what it means to grow as a kingdom citizen. The process is this, we rejoice in hope, we rejoice in our sufferings, and then we rejoice in God. You see, in capsule version we are taken from first loving God because he's so incredibly useful to loving God because he's altogether lovely. As new believers we rejoice in what God has done and is doing for us. I mean *1 John* says: *We love because he first loved us.* I mean he redeemed us, he's given us his life so that we can have purpose and meaning in our lives and we love God for that. We love him because he's so incredibly useful. Eventually God begins the process of refining that love. He makes it deeper and fuller and richer and broader than we could ever imagine and he does it through another singular word, and that word is "suffering." Why do we rejoice in sufferings? Well, again God tells us. He says: *We rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.* See what God is saying is it's suffering that makes the seed grow. It's a fertilizer. In fact the whole process of growth doesn't take place until the seed itself actually

dies. Jesus said, *"Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life."* I mean as a gardener I know one of the worst things that you can do to a seedling is water them so much that it never ever sends any shoots deeper into the soil. What it does is it grows only surface roots because it's never had to deep dig. And so when the dry times come, just like that rocky soil plant, it withers and it dies. Suffering is what forces us as kingdom citizens to dig deep. As the seed grows in its capacity, so we grow in our capacity to grasp the height, the depth, the width, and the breath of the love of God in Christ Jesus.

Just take a moment, just take a moment to ask yourself have I ever grown in my Christian life through good times? I mean I'm not denying that good times are wonderful, but I also think I can state categorically they're almost never a time of growth in our Christian life. I mean I wish it weren't so but it's a fact that when things go well, we tend to forget who? God. That's not just my opinion, I mean, God echoes that thought, and Deuteronomy says this: *"Take care lest you forgot the LORD your God by not keeping his commandments and his rules and his statutes, which I command you today, lest, when you have eaten and are full and have built*

*good houses and live in them, and when your herds and flocks multiply and your silver and gold is multiplied and all that you have is multiplied, then your heart be lifted up, and you forget the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery."* See when the world is shouting good things at you, it's very hard to hear God's voice. And on the other hand it's just a fact that when things go poorly, we tend to listen more. And when we're suffering we're oftentimes forced to listen. And we're forced to choose either grace or bitterness, the way of a snowball or the way of a seed. And when we suffer we can ignore the stretching that God does through suffering and grow bitter that God hasn't kept up his end of the deal or we can embrace his grace, knowing he has a plan, a place, and a purpose even if it is a complete mystery to us at the time. We start out rejoicing at what God has done for us and we're just kind of motoring along and oftentimes we are genuinely surprised that suffering comes into our lives. Have you noticed that, how that happens? There's a purpose behind it.

One of the most painful times in Janice and my life was the birth of our daughter Joanna. Now you don't hear her name mentioned often in my family because she died as she was being born. I still remember the big baby shower that they had for us at the church, going to the hospital and the shock of Janice having to deliver a



perfectly beautiful little girl who just happened to be stillborn. And it was arguably one of the worse days of our lives. But it was also -- and I say this at the risk of being misunderstood or misinterpreted -- it was also one of the most wonderful days of our lives, because at that very moment God showered us with his presence, and he did it in a way I've never experienced before. It was like he was saying, I know this is awful, and I will walk this through with you and I will never leave you or forsake you. I mean God poured his love into us just as the scripture says at that moment. And that suffering was something that God used to help us see that all we needed was him. And the goal of rejoicing in suffering is that third type of rejoicing we come across in verse 11: *We also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ.* Verse 11 says *we rejoice in God*, that means we rejoice in God alone. Suffering is what takes us from loving God because he's useful, to loving God because he's lovely. And the next time you find yourself in that awful place of suffering, realize God is there with you. As David said: *Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for You are with me; Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me.*

Well we've seen that the where is basically aiming our lives at organically growing our capacity to love God. The why is examining why we love him, seeing suffering as a means of moving on from

loving a God who is useful to loving a God who is lovely. Now thirdly we want to know the how. How do we get to grow into a citizen of the kingdom? Well, the answer to that isn't easy. I can't give you a magic formula, I can't give you a pill or a mantra that will make you grow but I can tell you in one word what will make you grow. That word is "discipline." See, one of the legacies of a bankrupt culture is our attitude towards discipline. I mean it smacks of a word which sounds like "works" and everyone knows we're not saved by works, and that word is "work." In fact discipline is work, and oftentimes it is that hard work that produces growth. You see, discipline is the process of making the unnatural natural. It's not natural for Stephen Curry to put a ball into a hoop. You may watch a game and see him put the ball in the hoop for two hours and just come away thinking this guy's amazing. What you don't realize is the ten thousand hours of practice it took to produce those two hours. And that's what discipline does. I mean it's not natural to swing a bat at a ball, but if you do it 20,000 times, it starts to become natural even though it isn't. Folks, it's not natural to pray, it's not natural to read scripture, it's not natural to have times of solitude so that you can speak with your Lord, but just like with athletes, you can make the unnatural natural through discipline.

You know the first time Janice and I started praying together, it

was awkward, it was uncomfortable, but having prayed together for over 40 years now, it's unnatural and weird for us not to. And if you're married and I've spoken to you at all, you know I probably asked you if you and your spouse pray together, because I think that's an incredibly important part of growing in Christ. The same is true for a corporate prayer meeting. I mean my week would seem completely unnatural without it. That came about by me forcing myself to make it a habit. The same is true for scripture, the same is true for quiet time. And here's the point, you don't do it for anybody but yourself. And until you see it in those terms, you're not going to do it. You see, you don't get points for discipline. Instead you get growth. Again, let me state this categorically. To say this, if you're not willing to grit your teeth and practice discipline, you will never grow in your Christian life. You will remain forever ineffective, unproductive, nearsighted, and blind. Those are not my words, those are God's. And that's not a threat, it's a promise. I wish there was another way but there's not.

Now there's a theology known as the Keswick Movement. It was a very popular theology decades back. It's -- in fact I was raised in it as a brand new Christian. I heard tons and tons of it. It was a theology that said the only effort a Christian should make in his Christian life is to -- quote -- "let go and let God." The

idea was that you were to make no effort towards your own sanctification other than getting out of the way and allowing God's Holy Spirit to do the work. Let go and let God. Well, as well-intentioned as that was, I now see that it flies in the face of so much of what scripture commands of us. It was Jesus himself who said in *Luke 13*: "*Strive to enter through the narrow door.*" And listen to what Paul said in *Hebrews 12*, he says: *Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings to closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us.* I mean, "run" and "strive" and "work out," and "make every effort." What we really need to let go of is the idea that our sanctification should be effortless.

I had someone call me a while back, said he just could not get himself to get to church. He said, I just don't know what to do. I told him that I could fix it for him but he had to follow my instructions to a T and he said, "Okay." I said, "Here's what you have to do." I said, "Number one, Saturday night, set your alarm clock. Number two, when it wakes up," I said, "roll over to the side of the bed." I said, "Extend your two legs." I said, "Pull up your pants. Insert your right leg into your right pant leg, insert your left leg into your left pant leg. Put on your shoes and your socks, stand up, put your shirt and get going." That's

how you make every effort. You see, make every effort means exactly what it says and it's also what God says when he says in *Philippians 2:12: Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling.* That's why Peter says: *Make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue, and virtue with knowledge, and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with steadfastness, and steadfastness with godliness, and godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love.* All of that comes about through work and discipline.

So let me conclude by asking you some where, why and how questions. First question is: Do you know where to aim your life? Is your destination to grow like a snowball or is it to grow like a seed? Do you want to become mechanically ethical or organically seed-like as a kingdom citizen? *2 Corinthians 2* says: *For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing.* Do you aspire to be the sweet fragrance of Christ himself? Secondly, why? Why do you love God? Where is your desire? Do you love God because he's useful or because he's lovely? Are you hungry for God himself? And lastly, how are you going to grow? Are you willing to embrace discipline, to make the unnatural natural? To commit to being in the word, to having regular times of prayer, to not forsaking the gathering together of the brethren? I mean, none of this is rocket science. It's just

about work, hard work. But the benefits are so great, so enduring and of such eternal consequence that I can clearly state that no effort is more worthwhile. I have never in my entire Christian life ever met anyone who ever regretted putting in that hard work. Instead of let go and let God, J. I. Packer suggests an alternative: Trust God and get going. Perhaps Peter says it best. *Make every effort.* Let's pray.

*Father, I just thank you for your word, I thank you for the constant correction that it offers. I thank you, Lord, without your word we would just be bouncing around like ping-pong balls just trying to figure it out. And thank you, Lord, that we have your word to go to, we have your word that speaks to the importance of discipline, speaks to the importance of growing as a kingdom citizen and all that's involved. And Father, I just pray for each and every one of us here that we might aim our lives at you, aim our lives at being the aroma of Christ, that we would see you not as useful but as lovely, and that we'd be willing to do the hard, mundane, prosaic work that it takes to just get the job done. And I pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.*