

# We Value Spiritual Growth



## Core Value

### *We value spiritual growth.*

We are committed to equip and to help our church family to cultivate deeper relationships with Christ and to become effective ministers. Our spiritual growth is shaped through age appropriate Bible studies, Sunday School classes, and other opportunities for spiritual formation.

*All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work. (2 Timothy 3:16-17)*

## Introduction

One summer when Brittany was getting ready to start kindergarten, she announced her plans to Dianne and me. With much confidence she declared, "I'm going to kindergarten and then I'm going to college." We were surprised to hear it because we didn't know it worked that way. We had never heard of anyone who went from kindergarten straight into college at the age of six, skipping grades 1-12. We were proud she would be the first to complete her college education before the age of ten. Brittany's plan reminded me of an idea I had when I was in first grade. I wondered what it would be like to start in twelfth grade and work my way down. I figured the first year would be really hard, but every year after that would get easier and easier. If I had only been bold enough to announce my plans to my parents, maybe I could have started a new educational system. I did not implement my plan. I completed first grade and moved on to second. So did Brittany.

We all know there is no starting at the end when it comes to our learning and development. The fact is, learning and growing never really ends. That is the way God made us. Even if we could skip to the end would we really want to and miss all the fun of discovery along

the way? The same is true for all aspects of our spiritual growth and development. So let us continue that happy journey of spiritual growth today.

## **Bible Study**

The scripture verse associated with the core value of spiritual growth comes, appropriately, out of a letter from Paul to the younger Timothy—“my beloved child”. He may have written this letter from prison. The letter takes on a sense of urgency, as Paul does not expect to live long. It is very important to Paul that he guide Timothy along in his faith journey toward spiritual growth.

Paul, by writing this letter, illustrates a key element of spiritual growth and nurture. Spiritual growth does not happen in isolation but in community. We are not alone in our spiritual journey. We learn from each other. We need mentors in the faith and others need us to be their mentors. You have heard it said, “It takes a village to raise a child.” Someone else has added to that, “and it take a church to raise a Christian.”

### **II Timothy 3:16-17**

These two verses are packed. First we see one of the most important resources for the Christian's spiritual growth—scripture. The scriptures available to Paul at that time were the Hebrew scriptures we know as the Old Testament. Our New Testament was in the process of being formed. In fact Paul, through his letters to churches, was one of the first contributors to our New Testament.

Paul tells Timothy, and us, that God speaks through the writers of scripture. Even though human beings penned the words, reflecting their unique personalities and perspectives, they are much more than ordinary words—they are inspired by God. We can say the same for the New Testament. Since scriptures are inspired by God, they are useful—“useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.”

Paul then tells us what scripture is useful for:

**Teaching.** Through the stories, history, prophetic utterances, songs, poetry, narratives, gospels, and letters, God teaches us how to live. God demonstrates God's love for us and shows us how to love others. The Bible guides us toward spiritual growth.

**Reproof.** In order to grow spiritually we must be humble enough to recognize that we have not arrived. We sin and fall short and need to accept God's reproof. The word “growth” implies that our growing is not complete.

**Correction.** Growing spiritually also means we acknowledge that we do not have all the answers and some of the answers we think we have are incorrect. Throughout our history there have been times when a majority of Christians have held passionately to beliefs that today most would say are absolutely wrong—the earth is flat, the sun revolves around the earth, and, as recently as my childhood, God intended for whites and blacks to be segregated. When we study the Bible as a community we should be suspicious of our firmly held assumptions and be willing to try on new perspectives to see how they fit. Being open to God speaking to us through scripture will sometimes lead us to affirm a particular belief and at other times will lead us to reconsider a long held belief. Changing firmly held beliefs is never easy; nevertheless there are times when we need correction in order to continue our spiritual growth.

***Training in Righteousness.*** Spiritual growth is more than learning facts about the Bible and God. Spiritual growth is about becoming righteous or right with God. Actually we allow God to make us right and God's word is a tool that God uses to train us in righteousness. Training is not just a mental exercise, but involves our whole being. Training is about a relationship with the teacher and the subject, in this case God and God's righteousness. Training in righteousness means we allow God to lead us away from temptation and into a right relationship with God.

If we use scripture in the way Paul has taught us—mentoring, teaching, reproof, correction, training in righteousness—we will become “proficient” and “equipped for every good work.” A church that follows Paul’s lead here will become prepared to do all the work God has called it to do and do it well.

## **Core Values at LABC**

Our core value on spiritual growth says that, “we are committed to equip and to help our church family to cultivate deeper relationships with Christ and to become effective ministers. Our spiritual growth is shaped through age appropriate Bible studies, Sunday School classes, and other opportunities for spiritual formation.” I really like the choice of words here. As a church we *equip* Christians, that is we give them the tools they need, and we *help* them use these tools. We *cultivate deeper relationships with Christ*. What better way to grow spiritually than to grow closer in our relationships with Christ our spiritual guide? The Christian community helps Christians hear the call of God and discover their spiritual gifts so that they become *effective ministers*. We offer *Bible studies, Sunday School classes, and opportunities for spiritual formation* to *shape* our church’s spiritual growth. This core value statement presents a powerful vision for spiritual growth at Lexington Avenue Baptist Church.

Spiritual formation, calls to mind the passage in Jeremiah in which God says, “Just like clay in the potter's hand, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel.” Our church grows spiritually when we allow God to form us like clay into the vessel God chooses. Spiritual growth is not about our effort, but God's formation. Spiritual growth happens when we submit ourselves to God like clay in the potter's hand. Bible study, community, and our relationships with Christ are all tools God uses to shape us.

The spiritual growth core value wisely states that Bible study should be *age appropriate*. We do not learn the same at every age and stage of development. The mind grows from the concrete literal mind of the young child to the mind of the teenager that is more able to think abstractly. Our teaching methods must reflect the development of people through all the ages and stages of life.

## **Conclusion**

It has been over fifteen years since Brittany declared that she was going to college after kindergarten. Now she is married and close to graduating from college. Along the way she has been nurtured in her faith by the Christian community. You have had a part in her spiritual formation. You have equipped her and helped her grow and discover her gifts and calling.

## References

*Mercer Commentary on the Bible.* Watson E. Mills and Richard F. Wilson, Editors (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1995). (Available in the church library and Keith's office)

*Harper's Bible Commentary.* James L. Mays, Editor (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1988). (Available in the church library and Keith's office)



## Daily Devotionals: Spiritual Growth



### **Monday: *Putting Ourselves in God's Way*, by Linda Wright**

#### **Scripture Reading: Luke 15:11-32**

*Companions in Christ* is “a small group experience in Spiritual Formation”. I am currently experiencing this book with a second group. The group explores scripture, new dimensions of prayer, Christ’s call in your life, and Christian community. Both groups that I have been a part of have moved me closer to God. Being able to share your struggles and triumphs with other believers is invaluable. For example, I was having a difficult time with the session called “The Flow and Means of Grace”. It seemed to be saying that the harder you worked (through spiritual disciplines), the more grace you would receive. This was counter to my understanding of grace as undeserved and unearned, a free gift. A passage from the book reads, “Placing ourselves in a position where we may benefit more from the life-giving light of God’s love is the purpose of every means of grace. The means of grace are the methods and practices we use to put ourselves in God’s way. They help us to adopt a posture of receptivity.” I was given new insight (grace?). Let me explain with this analogy:

I have a garden and I am in need of mulch. My neighbor has some mulch that he is trying to give away. If I stay in my house and never talk to my neighbor, he will give that mulch to someone else. However, if I talk to my neighbor over the years, he knows my interest in gardening and my need of mulch. He will likely think of me when he has some to give away. The next time I talk to my neighbor, I am “putting myself in his way” and the offer of mulch will come. I am not more deserving than someone else and I did not earn this “grace”.

### **Tuesday: *Spiritual Growth*, by Betsy Tumey**

#### **Scripture Reading: I Kings 19:11-13**

Many years ago, the subject of spiritual growth became one of my most passionate interests. During difficult times my spiritual development has taken sharp angled turns. As a younger person, I wondered if there really was a God. Then, through a deep necessity to be fulfilled, it became undeniably evident that a greater, all-knowing power exists. For several years, perhaps one would have referred to me as a “fundamentalist”. Diligent study of the Bible scriptures became my greatest source of security and comfort. Eventually though, over time, through life experiences of my own and those of others, the realization dawned that what I thought a particular scripture meant was perhaps not the entire understanding that God wanted me to know. My doubts about everything religious spurred on my spiritual search with an almost obsessive intensity. During more recent years, a study of different religions has yielded surprising and often fascinating insights. Also, reading the thoughts and ideas of several great spiritual people of different beliefs has proved satisfying. Through my discernment in this broad range of study, a much broader and more profound interpretation of our Bible scriptures has been found. Yes, I do indeed believe that “all scripture is inspired by God.” But, the inspirations of both non-Christian and Christian merit our attention if we are truly conscientious in our search for spiritual growth.

There are other avenues to spiritual growth among which are: prayer and meditation, service to others, and Christian fellowship. A “small voice” exists within each of us. If we learn to listen carefully, it will direct our paths.

**Wednesday: *Planting Seeds*, by Ervin Farmer**  
**Scripture Reading: 2 Timothy 3:16-17**

My spiritual growth started when the seed was planted in me at an early age by Christian parents, Christian relatives and friends in the mountains of Virginia. Regular country church services, tent revivals, traditional creek baptisms, foot washings, and dinner on the ground were common occurrences in my upbringing. My voice solos and clarinet solos (not at the same time), and participation in Christmas and Easter plays made my parents proud.

Sometime around age twelve, I began to balk at attending any church activities. By Junior High through High School, I went to church just to have a place to go and to cause trouble. I know that’s hard to believe. My Sunday school teacher at Falling Water Baptist Church was Joe Sayers, a good Christian man and a fine teacher for those that would pay attention. I knew he meant well and was trying to help me, but at that time I wouldn’t listen. I suspect he was glad when I graduated and went away to college.

After graduation and in the world of “making a living” for a wife and two pre-school boys, I became a “C & E church goer”—Christmas and Easter—to see the kids in the pageants. One night the pastor and Joe Sayers came to our home for a visit, and asked Brenda and me to come to church more regularly. As time passed, they tried to talk to me about God’s plan of salvation. As I am writing this, I can still see the disappointment in Joe’s face and the tears in his eyes when I told him I did not believe in God. In fact, Brenda says I was mean to them. That was the end of my church attendance there, and my spiritual growth was stunted, or non-existent.

When we moved to Danville in 1979, we were led to LABC. Brenda, the three children that live here now, and their families became members. It took me twenty-five years of growing at LABC until I finally saw the “light” on January 4, 2004. Later that same year, the popular Southern Gospel trio, “Greater Vision”, had a hit song called Faces. The lyrics tell the story of a man that dreamed he died, and was in Heaven waiting for his reward for a lifetime of sharing the Word of God. As he stood before Jesus, he was concerned that he had not done enough to lead souls to Christ. Seldom did he see the harvest come from the seeds he had planted. Then Jesus told him to turn around, and see all the Faces of all those that were won to Christ because of him. I thought of Joe every time I heard the song.

There are the obvious influences on my spiritual growth of family, friends and ministers, but I thought of the effect that Joe Sayers had on my life and he never knew it. Joe’s almost ninety now, and I didn’t want to wait until we see each other in Heaven to tell him. On a trip last year back to Virginia, I made a visit to his home to say thank you. He played a big part in cultivating the seed that had been planted by others earlier, even though it took 57 years, 2 months, and 4 days of growth for them to see the fruits of their labors.

What a home visit reversal from our time together after almost 35 years had passed. I was in his home, he wasn’t mean, there was no disappointment, and the tears on our faces were caused by the joy and gladness of a new believer.

**Thursday: *The Spiritual Life, from some classics of Christian Devotion***  
**Scripture Reading: Hebrews 12:1-2**

God's love energies are continually pouring on us. We simply need to open like a flower to the morning sun, allowing God's love to fill us and flow through us to others. (E. Glenn Hinson, Stained glass window The Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond, VA)

...what we have to do is to beg like poor and needy persons coming before a great and rich Emperor and then cast down our eyes in humble expectation. (Teresa of Avila, *Interior Castle*)

Not only do we only know God through Jesus Christ, but we only know ourselves through Jesus Christ; we only know life and death through Jesus Christ. Apart from Jesus Christ we cannot know the meaning of our life or our death, of God, or of ourselves. (Blaise Pascal, *Pensees*)

What wonderful profundity there is in your utterances! The surface meaning lies open before us and charms beginners. Yet the depth is amazing, my God, the depth is amazing. To concentrate on it is to experience awe—the awe of adoration before its transcendence and the trembling love. (Augustine, *Confessions*)

As Mary Virginia, my mother, bore me, and as a baby held me and still holds me in being with her eyes and her arms, so does God our mother hold both of us in existence with a steadfast attention so loving and so persistent that we can never escape it, even if we wish. (Roberta C. Bondi, *Memories of God*)

**Friday: *A Spiritual Diet of Daily Devotion, by Angela Sell***  
**Scripture Reading: Psalm 1:2, Ephesians 6:12**

Our spiritual growth is dependant upon our spiritual diet. In order to grow spiritually, we must be fed spiritually. Just as we nourish our bodies with healthy foods, we must also nourish our spirit with the word of God.

Seeking out the word of God in daily devotion aids our spiritual growth. Since we are fed “spiritual junk food” by the world, (Ephesians 6:12) we must make a conscious effort to seek out a healthy “spiritual meal”. Daily devotion is like your daily vitamin. It nourishes you with the word of God so that you might not fall ill in your walk with the Lord. There are times when life may seem too busy. That is often when we need to slow down and spend time with Him the most. Exercising in devotion just 10 minutes a day can counteract an entire days worth of spiritual junk food. So, stay on this diet of being fed spiritually. It is the only diet with guaranteed results that will last for eternity.