

Why Don't Christians Grow?

Rich Nathan

January 14 & 15, 2017

Spiritual but Not Religious?

Galatians 6:1-5

One of the most frustrating things in life is to find yourself in a situation where growth is supposed to happen, but it simply doesn't. For example, maybe you discipline yourself to save money for an emergency or for retirement. You put all of your money into an investment that is supposed to grow, but instead you end up losing most of your money in the investment and you're left feeling that you would have been better off taking all your money and putting it under your mattress. Or investing it in the shoe department at Nordstrom's.

Or maybe your son or daughter has real athletic ability, but they're on a team where the coach has no capacity to develop talent. So your son or daughter hits a ceiling in their athletic development way earlier than they should have.

In all of life, we find that for anything or anyone to grow there needs to be the right environment for growth.

The environment for growth

So, for example, if you want to grow a plant, the plant needs sufficient space to grow so that it doesn't become root-bound. It needs light. Your plant needs to be watered, but not overwatered. I would add one other factor – the plant needs to be owned by the right person. My wife does really well with plants. We'll have plants for like a decade. Other people seem to have the black thumb of death. A plant will just give up and die when it's given as a gift to these folks. It just knows, "I might as well just die now rather than suffer a slow, lingering death with this person."

To grow, things need to be in the right environment. Global poverty is made so much worse because in many countries there's just not a healthy environment for growing a business. In many places, corruption permeates every step of starting a business. You have to pay off somebody to get a license. You have to pay off the electric company to get a hook-up for electricity. You have to pay off the water company to get a water hook-up. You have to pay somebody else off to get a license to export or to import.

And in so many countries, the levels of bureaucracy stifle all legitimate businesses. I remember reading an article about starting a business in a South American country. They said if you decided to do it by the book, the total amount of time you'd have to

stand in line for various licenses to start a business in that country would be 26 years. In many places, the environment for growing a business is terrible.

Babies, of course, need the right environment to grow and thrive. Babies need to be put in a safe sleeping environment. In fact, Vineyard Columbus is one of the leaders in our community in encouraging the city's safe sleep initiative. Our state has one of the highest infant mortality rates because of unsafe sleeping situations for babies. Babies die by sleeping with their parents or by having other objects in the crib so that they suffocate. Babies die when they're to sleep on a sofa or an arm chair.

Babies need the right nutrients to thrive. They need to get proper vaccinations. They need love. They need touch. They need hugs. They need to be listened to. They need to be talked to and read to.

Just as there is an environment in which people grow physically and grow emotionally, so there is an environment in which people grow spiritually. In recent years, there's been a rise of the number of people who label themselves spiritual but not religious. There are a lot of people who have a kind of do-it-yourself entrepreneurial type of spirituality. Lots and lots of people try to go it alone in their spiritual life. They try to maintain a spiritual view of life – that the universe is more than matter and energy. They try to be kind, loving, tolerant, giving people. They try to engage in various spiritual practices. Practices like prayer or worship or giving to the poor. But they try to do that without being deeply rooted in a supportive community.

Many of these spiritual but not religious people are like Christmas trees. Initially, they are green and full of life. Even though you water them, over time they dry up. They start dropping needles. They lose their vitality and their spiritual passion because they are not rooted in a community of faith.

In the passage that we're going to look at today, the Apostle Paul addresses the number one reason why people don't grow spiritually. In Galatians 6, Paul addresses the reason why many people make a good start at Christianity – they have some initial experience of God. But then they fall back into the same habits and patterns and they fail to grow as Christians. Have you ever asked yourself why, with all the information that we have – all the online resources, the Christian books, all the versions of the Bible – why so many people fail to grow spiritually in America?

In Galatians 6, we discover the number one reason why people fail to grow is individualism. Folks try to do the spiritual life alone. I happen to believe that individualism – trying to go it alone with God without deep, transforming, supportive Christian relationships – is a greater threat to your spiritual well-being and the spiritual well-being of your children than is our entertainment culture or American consumerism or American materialism or even the sexual revolution. We need other Christians to

begin the Christian life. And we need other Christians to move forward in our Christian lives. The Christian life is a *shared journey of growth*. The environment for growing as a Christian is a deep rooting in a healthy Christian community. We cannot grow alone.

I've titled today's message, "Why don't Christians grow?"

Galatians 6:1-5

Brothers and sisters, if someone is caught in a sin, you who live by the Spirit should restore that person gently. But watch yourselves, or you also may be tempted. ² Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ. ³ If anyone thinks they are something when they are not, they deceive themselves. ⁴ Each one should test their own actions. Then they can take pride in themselves alone, without comparing themselves to someone else, ⁵ for each one should carry their own load.

So, what is the specific context for spiritual growth?

The context for growth

Here at Vineyard Columbus we have a mission statement that says:

Our Mission is to develop a community of disciples who experience God, love one another and partner with Christ to heal the world.

The specific context in which disciples of Jesus are developed is community. The reason why a person cannot grow as a disciple on their own, but rather must be in community is that we human beings are made in the image of God. To be made in God's image is to be made as a relational being. This separates Christianity from every other religion on the face of the earth.

You know, in other religions God is not intrinsically a relational being. In Eastern religion, God is impersonal. He doesn't weep. He doesn't rejoice. He doesn't feel anything. In Islam and in Judaism, God is unipersonal. God had no relationship with anything else until he created angels and human beings. In every other religion, relationship is not part of who God is. In every other religion, outside of Christianity, there was a time when relationship did not exist.

But in Christianity, at the very heart of the structure of the universe is relationship! Christianity believes that God is, in himself, a community of persons. Christians are people who believe in a tri-personal God. Christians are people who believe God is a Trinity – Father, Son and Holy Spirit. God existed as a community of persons from all eternity. There was never a time where there weren't relationships of love in this or any other universe. The Father loving the Son and the Spirit. The Son loving the Father and the Spirit. The Spirit loving the Father and the Son.

So the reason why human beings who are not in relationship with another human being cannot grow spiritually is because being entirely alone is counter to the divine image stamped on us. From the beginning to the end, the Bible tells us that we cannot live the life God intended us to live, you cannot fulfill God's purpose in creating you or experience the spiritual growth God has for you on your own. You must be in community.

There is a little phrase found in Galatians 6:2 which speaks to us about the indispensable nature of Christian community. Here's what we read in verse 2:

Galatians 6:2

² Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.

Literally, this text reads:

Bear one another's burdens and thus fulfill the law of Christ

The phrase "one another" is actually just one word in Greek:

One another = *allelon*

We find this word dozens of times in the New Testament. There are dozens of commands regarding what we are to do with one another. For example, we are told to encourage one another.

1 Thessalonians 4:18

¹⁸ Therefore encourage one another with these words.

We are told to offer hospitality to one another.

1 Peter 4:9

⁹ Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling.

We are told 15 times in the New Testament to love one another.

John 13:34

³⁴ "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another."

We are told to accept one another.

Romans 15:7

⁷ Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God.

We are told to spur one another on.

Hebrews 10:24

²⁴ And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds,

We're told to forgive one another, to serve one another, to speak to one another, to teach and admonish one another. I go through all of this to say that there are dozens of commands in the New Testament that you cannot obey by yourself. You cannot offer hospitality to one another unless there's another. Or serve one another unless there's another. Bottom line – it is impossible to be an obedient, growing Christian unless you are rooted in a church community where you can practice all of these one another's with other Christians. The context for growth is deep rooting in a church.

Here at Vineyard Columbus, the main way we practice community is in small groups – men's groups, women's groups, support and recovery groups, co-ed groups for everyone from middle school to empty nesters. If you are not presently in a group, we have an incredibly simple way for you to start beginning next week. Exploring Community is a six-week series held at the Cooper Road campus that provides a great opportunity to experience small groups on-campus, while creating new relationships. You'll learn what small groups are all about, with the goal of forming a small group that will continue on when the series ends.

Exploring Community

Beginning Monday, January 23 @ 7:00-9:00pm

What is the focus of growth?

The focus of growth

Let's look at the text again:

Galatians 6:1

Brothers and sisters, if someone is caught in a sin, you who live by the Spirit should restore that person gently. But watch yourselves, or you also may be tempted.

You know, it's easy for us to read Bible verses and skip over key words and phrases. The phrase "Brothers and sisters" is absolutely fundamental. Paul is communicating to us in his opening words, two basic thoughts.

First, that the church is supposed to be an extended family of brothers and sisters living in relationship and interdependence with each other. The church is an extended family.

The church is not just a collection of individuals who choose to meet together on Sunday morning at a mutually convenient location and time while we worship God individually. The church is an extended family of brothers and sisters who come alongside of each other in times of need and who comfort, encourage, challenge and admonish each other.

This little phrase “brothers and sisters” tells us something about the nature of the church. We’re not a religious country club. We’re not a philosophical society. We’re not an academic institution. We’re not a business. The church is an extended family.

This phrase “brothers and sisters” tells us that the focus of Christian attention when it comes to the issue of sin is sin in the church. It’s sin in the life of our brothers and sisters.

Wow, if American Christians could just get this one down. If we Christians would simply admit that we have an incredibly limited ability to fix the morals of the whole world. What if Christians spent almost no time talking about the morals and the behaviors of those outside of the church? Instead, what if we took 99% of our energy and our focus as it comes to behavioral change to deal with other Christians in the church and we spent only 1% of our energy on everyone else? I think the church’s witness in the community would be so much healthier than it is right now.

Brothers and sisters, when you read most Christian blogs or tweets or listen to most Christian radio or you read most Christian fundraising letters, the entire focus is on what’s wrong out there. What the latest Hollywood outrage is, what the latest upsetting situation coming from Washington is. I totally support Christians as citizens being involved in the democratic process and lobbying and voting and petitioning our government and doing what every other citizen has a right to do. But I want you to see that Paul’s primary focus when he’s talking about sin is not what’s going on in the larger Roman society however corrupt that society is. It’s on the church – on what’s happening in our extended family and the quality of life we are living.

Our focus in the 21st century as Christians, when it comes to sin, should not be on what immorality that’s there in the larger culture or in the media or online. Our focus should be precisely where Paul’s was – on helping other Christians to grow in their followership of Christ. I think if we, as a church, focused on sin in the church we would be so much healthier. Jesus intended the church to be an alternative society. We are supposed to be the light of the world, a city set on a hill, the salt of the earth. Oh, how much more hope we would have for our future and for the future of our country and our world if the church became what the church was designed to be – a people set apart, a community of people radically committed to the way of Jesus.

Let’s continue:

Galatians 6:1

Brothers and sisters, if someone is caught in a sin, you who live by the Spirit should restore that person gently. But watch yourselves, or you also may be tempted.

You don't grow, you don't fully experience the abundant life that Christ came to bring by yourself. American individualism – me and God doing it on our own – will utterly fail you at this point. If you are caught in a sin, as Paul describes a picture of a trap, if you are trapped in a compulsive behavior, if you are what therapists call “addicted” in some way, if you've grooved out in your life certain habit patterns over years and decades so that every time you go around the track your wheel gets caught in the groove, you will not be able to free yourself with God's help alone apart from other Christians. Hardly anyone ever recovers from an addiction or a compulsive behavior apart from deep connection to a support network.

Psychologist Dr. Henry Cloud, in his book *How People Grow*, says this:

“Some people may stop their addictive or compulsive behaviors apart from other people but if their relational patterns do not change, they will relapse, if they are not involved in a group.”

Why don't we grow? Because we're disconnected from each other. Because we live isolated lives.

Now, the Apostle Paul in this wonderfully well-balanced passage of Galatians 6 tells us that there are two human parties that are involved in any Christian's growth.

The agents of growth

The first is other people. We see that here in Galatians 6:1-2.

Galatians 6:1-2

Brothers and sisters, if someone is caught in a sin, you who live by the Spirit should restore that person gently. But watch yourselves, or you also may be tempted. ² Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.

So there is a mutual responsibility. We help each other. But the other agent is ourselves. There are some things others can't do for us that we must do for ourselves. We see that in verses 4-5.

Galatians 6:4-5

⁴ Each one should test their own actions. Then they can take pride in themselves alone, without comparing themselves to someone else, ⁵ for each one should carry their own load.

So, let me take each of these human agents in turn. First, what others need to do for us. We'll look at our mutual responsibility and then, what we must do for ourselves, what no one else can do for us. We'll look at our personal responsibilities.

Our mutual responsibility

There is a great picture of our mutual responsibility to each other in John 11. Jesus is called by his dear friends, Mary and Martha, to go to their little town of Bethany because their brother, Lazarus is sick. Jesus waits. Lazarus dies. When Jesus gets there Lazarus is already dead for four days. He is in a tomb. Jesus comes and he tells some men to roll the stone away from the tomb. Then Jesus gives the command: "Lazarus, come forth!" Someone wisely remarked that if Jesus hadn't specifically addressed his command to Lazarus, all the dead in history would have risen. "Lazarus, come forth!" And Lazarus comes out of the tomb like a mummy wrapped in grave clothes. Jesus turns to some of the people there and he says,

John 11:44

44 "Take off the grave clothes and let him go."

And so we see in this text the role that Jesus plays in someone's life and the role that we in the church play. We have no capacity to make someone else spiritually alive. We can't heal someone. We can't give someone else the forgiveness of sins. We can't free someone else from guilt or shame over things that they've done or things done to them. We can't make someone else born again. Only Jesus can issue that command: "come forth!"

What we can do is help each other to get unwrapped. We Christians are like mummies. Jesus speaks to people who are spiritually dead in their sins and he shouts: "Come forth!" He makes us spiritually alive, born again by God's Spirit. But even though we become spiritually alive when we accept Christ into our hearts, we walk around like mummies wrapped up in ourselves and our crazy ways of thinking and all of our broken patterns. Jesus says to his church: Help each other to get out of the grave clothes. Christians have a responsibility to help restore each other.

Now American individualism teaches us that we don't have mutual responsibility toward one another. American individualism teaches us that it's none of my business what anyone else does. American individualism teaches Christians in the church that if he wants to get a divorce, that's none of our business. If she wants to use drugs and wreck her health, that's not my concern. If someone in my small group is sleeping with their

boyfriend or girlfriend or is gossiping or is unkind, my only play is to avoid them. But the Bible says, if you're a Christian you can't avoid this ministry of restoration with your brothers and sisters. We are our brothers' keepers!

The Apostle Paul wisely reminds us that this business of restoring one another is like threading a needle. It's not like chopping down a tree. I love this statement in verse 1:

Galatians 6:1

Brothers and sisters, if someone is caught in a sin, you who live by the Spirit should restore that person gently. But watch yourselves, or you also may be tempted.

If we're going to confront someone else's sin, we need to do it gently. Jesus uses the illustration of eye surgery to describe how correction ought to be done. He tells us that correction is like taking a speck out of someone else's eye. We have to be very gentle when we reach into someone else's eye. We don't use a fork or a claw hammer.

Some people are on the opposite side of avoidance. They have no problem telling others what's wrong with them. "I'm the kind of person that just speaks my mind. I let the chips fall where they may." Then I'm shocked when someone might be hurt or offended by an insensitive correction. Paul says to restore gently.

Then he gives another admonition in verse 1:

Galatians 6:1

Brothers and sisters, if someone is caught in a sin, you who live by the Spirit should restore that person gently. But watch yourselves, or you also may be tempted.

How might we be tempted in the process of trying to restore another person? We might be tempted to believe that we're superior to them. We might be tempted to stand above them, to judge them. To think that we're made of different stuff than them. The truth is, friends, that all of us as human beings are made of crooked timber. Who knows what we would be like if we faced exactly the same temptations that this other person did? The same wounds. The same disappointments. The same obstacles. Who knows what we would be like? Paul says to watch yourself when you restore. Don't allow yourself to become a self-superior judge.

There's another aspect to our mutual responsibility that goes beyond restoring each other. That is the responsibility that we have to bear one another's burdens. Listen what the Apostle Paul says in verse 2:

Galatians 6:2

²Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.

When I'm on a plane, as I frequently am, and I see a woman struggling to get her suitcase into the overhead compartment, I don't just sit there watching her struggle. I jump up to help. The ministry of burden bearing, of relieving someone else of the load they are carrying, is one of the most searching tests of whether a church is full of the love of Jesus. Do people in the church really bear one another's burdens?

Last week, I talked about why those who currently label themselves "spiritual but not religious" won't ultimately succeed in being spiritual. That we need the undergirding of a church community. I think it's particularly, here regarding burden bearing, that we discover some of the bankruptcy in being spiritual, but not religious. Being spiritual but not religious, having a do-it-yourself spirituality, not being part of a larger religious community – all of that works great so long as the world is a happy place. Full of rainbows and puppies and ice cream cones.

But what happens when the world is not all that it should be? What happens when the weight of this broken world crushes you under the load? When you try to carry the burden of sorrow by yourself because you've lost a loved one? When you try to carry the burden of a fearsome diagnosis, like Alzheimer's or cancer or Parkinson's or ALS, by yourself? When you try to carry the burden of a developmentally disabled child or a profoundly unhappy marriage or an addiction or any one of a hundred different things that is too heavy for one individual to bear? When you try to carry that by yourself, you realize how weak we really are. How quickly exhausted our own personal resources are. How much we need each other.

Finding God in nature is great so long as the day is sunny and bright and there's a gentle breeze blowing against your face. But finding God in nature when you're walking through a storm, when the wind is howling and the rain is freezing and trees are falling – that's when we need somebody to invite us in to the warmth of their support and hospitality.

When Marlene and I recently lost our son-in-law, we experienced from this church the ministry of burden bearing. My daughter is still being helped and cared for by loving people through prayer and practical assistance. We need each other! We can't go it alone.

But Paul says, there are some things that no one else can do for us, that we must do for ourselves. He speaks to us about

Our personal responsibilities

Galatians 6:4-5

⁴ Each one should test their own actions. Then they can take pride in themselves alone, without comparing themselves to someone else, ⁵ for each one should carry their own load.

There is no contradiction between verse 2 where Paul says, “bear one another’s burdens” and verse 5 that “each one should carry their own load.” The Greek word for “burden” in verse 2 is different than the word for “load” in verse 5. The word for burden in verse 2 is the Greek word:

Burden = *Baros*

It means a “heavy weight or a heavy load”. A burden too heavy for one person to bear alone. The Greek word used for load in verse 5 is:

Load = *Phortion*

Which is a common term for a person’s backpack or knapsack. So, we bear one another’s burdens that are too heavy for a person to bear alone, but there is one weight that we cannot share. A pack that is light enough for every individual to bear. That is the weight of our responsibility to God on the Day of Judgment. On that day, each person will have to bear their own weight. On the Day of Judgment, I cannot borrow God’s forgiveness from you and you will not be able to borrow God’s forgiveness from me. Each of us will have to carry our own load. Each of us will stand before God by ourselves.

Now, the wonderful good news of Christianity is this: God sent Jesus into the world to be the ultimate burden bearer. The reason why Paul says in verse 2:

Galatians 6:2

² Carry each other’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ

Is that when we help one another carry a load too heavy for them, we are walking in the footsteps of Jesus who is the ultimate burden bearer. What burden to God send Jesus into the world to bear?

Here’s what we read in Isaiah 53:

Isaiah 53:6

⁶ We all, like sheep, have gone astray,
each of us has turned to our own way;
and the LORD has laid on him
the iniquity of us all.

On the Day of Judgment, there will be two kinds of people. Those who appear before God crushed under the weight of their own sin and those who appear before God standing tall because they've placed the burden of their sin upon Jesus, the divine burden bearer. Jesus invites us to come to him and give him all of our burdens. Have you done that friend? Have you given Jesus the burden of your sin?

Let's pray.

Why Don't Christians Grow?

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Spiritual but Not Religious?

Galatians 6:1-5

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- II. The context for growth

- III. The focus of growth

- IV. The agents of growth
 - A. Our mutual responsibility

 - B. Our personal responsibility