

# Growth is vital but never easy.

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John 15<sup>1-8</sup> / 1Cor 13<sup>8-13</sup>

Many of you will know that I love to grow things and frankly I've loved to do this for as long as I can remember. One of my most positive memories from school when I was very young was of being given a small vegetable patch of my own which I could tend and grow whatever I wanted. And I dutifully and delightfully worked this over and did grow some things. And then one day the school decided to have a gardening competition in which people could enter a garden that they'd planted all by themselves. So I entered it and I'll never forget the doubt expressed by the teacher that I might have done something like this. Anyway the day came for the inspection and I drove back home and showed the teacher my plot. Well, he was amazed and I won that section of the competition. It must have made a huge impression because I've never stopped gardening since then. But I've done so against a background of loss.

You see gardening is all about learning from your losses. Gardening can be such a demoralising, deflating thing because things die quite easily if you don't care for them. Vegetables are actually quite fragile at certain times in their life and if you miss a watering or a feeding or a weeding – they simply don't

produce. And, of course, growth is the issue. Gardening is all about growth. Without growth you have nothing. Growth is the key issue. This is the thing I've learned from many years of gardening; of making mistakes, of forgetting to do things at the right time; of simply planting the wrong things. Growth is vital but it's never easy. [Repeat]

I once spent hours learning to play the piano. (Yes that really is me...) It was one of the most formative experiences of my life because for once I couldn't do it quickly. Pushing my little fingers to play the right notes, developing the flexibility and the strength to play smoothly and remembering what to play comes slowly and painfully to most people because **growth is vital but never easy.**

Another area of growth for me has been that of learning to listen. This has been a difficult task for me. You have to give people space to listen. I've never had much patience for that. You have to wait for others to listen. I've always found waiting difficult. You have to resist the urge to talk if you want to listen. I like talking!! And yet listening is a crucial skill in caring for people. A pastor needs to learn to listen. It's vital to grow in this area and it's not easy.

**Any kind of growth that is good is simply not easy.**

Think about it. Growing a new skill such as a sport, a new language, learning to paint – it's never easy. More importantly

growing and maturing as a person is vital but it's never easy. Growing in our ability to make good judgements, to avoid bad choices, to develop healthy relationships, to love. These things are vital... **but they're never easy.**

And yet it is clear that God intends for us all to grow. We are built to grow. We are built to become mature – to go from infancy, to toddlerhood, to childhood, to youth, to young adulthood and to become adults. We are not built to stay put – to stay in infancy, no matter how adorable we were as infants – would be a tragedy. To stay in childhood no matter how wonderful we were as children (yeh right!) would be a tragedy. **God intends that we should grow.** We were not meant to stay in our immature state no matter how cute that might have been. **It is vital to God that we grow.**

Even before the fall it is clear that God had intended there be a process of gradual maturing to the point where children became old enough to leave their parents and to form independent and long lasting relationships with others and especially with the opposite sex.

**<sup>24</sup>For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh. (Gen 2)**

So important was this process that those who are essentially the guardians of maturity – our parents – are given special

mention in the Ten Commandments as worthy of unconditional honour by children.

**<sup>12</sup>Honour your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you. (Ex 20)**

Paul makes it clear that our destiny in Christ is to grow up, to mature, to become an adult.

**<sup>11</sup>When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways. (1 Cor 13)**

And finally Jesus makes it clear that God's design for us is to become productive, to be fruitful people and thus to grow to the point where we can bear fruit.

**<sup>1</sup>"I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower. <sup>2</sup>He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. (John 15)**

But growing is not easy. The very fact that Jesus uses the idea of pruning should tell us something about growing. I mean, who really wants stuff cut off? Who really wants the obvious pain that comes with that? Who wants to lose something because other parts need to grow so that we might become fruitful? I know I don't like that.

And yet God says to each of us – **‘My will for you is to grow, to become mature.’ My will for you is to grow as both a person and as my witness here in this life.** And Paul gives us a clear indication in several places of what that will look like...

**<sup>22</sup>By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, <sup>23</sup>gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things (Gal 5)**

Is there anything there you need to grow in? Perhaps just one? Perhaps just an improvement in one? Perhaps you simply don't know and you know that's not at all unusual. In fact I would say this is the most common difficulty with growth... we just don't know that we need to grow in a certain area – we are ignorant of our immaturity. I mean have you ever had someone come up to you and admit that they were or are immature in a certain area and needed help? That would be a pretty rare experience wouldn't it. And yet in many ways this is where most growth needs to start – **with a confession of our need to grow!**

Another hardship is what I've alluded to already – that growth sometimes requires we give away another area of our lives there something God is calling you to stop. To give away, to leave behind? Is there something that if you just left it behind would free up so much time to really grow.

Another area of difficulty that prevents growth is our pride. Pride is a growth killer because pride will always tend to reject

the idea that someone else can teach us something. The Church is notoriously bad in this respect. The green movement has been hammering away at Western Society for 40-50 years and it took the church a long time to wake up to the fact that actually we had a biblical mandate in this area that we were ignoring at our peril.

We also have a mandate to care for the poor no matter how they became poor or why they remain poor. Are we prepared to learn from organisations whose care has less strings attached and simply care?

Personally it may be hard to admit that someone else's behaviour is better than ours, that their gentleness, their patience, their generosity is something we could learn from – but to grow we will have to do that. And here's the killer – it may be that the person we have to learn from is not a Christian. Are we prepared to admit that and to learn what God can teach us through someone who doesn't believe what we believe? You know even Jesus did this. He once healed the child of a pagan woman – a Canaanite no less because she taught Him a lesson in faith and that lesson was that people who don't know God can show amazing insight and maturity when they get desperate enough. Despite initially refusing to hear her request Jesus finally relented and healed her daughter because, as He said..

<sup>26</sup>He replied, “It is not right to take the children’s bread and toss it to the dogs.”

<sup>27</sup>“Yes it is, Lord,” she said. “Even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master’s table.”

<sup>28</sup>Then Jesus said to her, “Woman, you have great faith! Your request is granted.” And her daughter was healed from that very hour. (Matt 15)

God will use anything He wants to get the message through to you – **‘Richard! It’s vital that you grow, but it won’t be easy!’**

God wants you to grow because as you do your life will become what God intended it should be and you will be able to achieve the things God purposed for your life and this is where true fulfilment comes from. **True success is a life mature in Christ...**

[Repeat]

Such a life won’t guarantee us worldly success or wealth or prestige – at least not this side of heaven. But it will guarantee us an eternal future and an amazing sense of accomplishment in this life as well. And perhaps we won’t know much of that – perhaps we won’t hear much encouragement although to be honest if you’re in this church you should find us a very encouraging lot because God’s mature people are encouraging. We may not hear much encouragement from the world. But you know what I want to hear more than anything else in this life or the next? I want to hear this... I want to hear Jesus say to

me **'Well done good and faithful servant. Enter now into your rest.'**

Who will hear those words? I think people who've allowed themselves to grow; who've committed to growth; who've suffered the pain of growth – who will hear those words.

Imagine hearing those words as the first thing you wake up to once this life is done. Don't you want to hear those words? Isn't it worth committing to growing just to hear those words?

Well done, good and faithful servant. Enter now into your rest. Won't you commit with me now to a year of growth?