

## Today Counts Show Episode 82

If you do attend church, you will not find God inside the walls of that stained glass building any more than you will find him at the desk at your office or out on the field in your work or at your dinner table or driving down the road. In other words, one of the first things that you can do to grow spiritually is to acknowledge that God is with you, that he is near. You could talk to him just the way you could pick up the phone and talk to me. And even though some might look at you funny, remember that God spoke things into existence; he did not think things into existence. Scripture says he spoke things into existence.

[Music]

Welcome to the Today Counts show. Today does count because it impacts and influences your tomorrow, and the day after that, and the day after that. The Today Counts podcast is sponsored by the generous donors of the Lead Today Community. I am your host, Jim Piper.

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Hi, everyone and welcome back to the Today Counts show. I am your host, Jim Piper. Today it's just going to be me, and we're going to be talking about spiritual growth. What is spiritual growth? Why is it important? What does it look like? How about I just dive in here real quick? I'm taken to the book of Ephesians in the New Testament. Regardless of where you come from in your faith journey and what is most on your mind, whether it's work or home or your family, I believe this podcast will be helpful for you as you engage with me on some of the points.

But let me start off with something that Paul wrote two thousand years ago. He says, "Now we will no longer be immature like children." So, you know, at the office and at home, there's plenty of immaturity going on, and maybe you're guilty of some of that, and maybe you're not. I know that I can act unbecomingly at times, I can act immature at times. Paul is obviously laying the groundwork, "Then we will no longer be immature like children. We won't be tossed and blown about by every wind of new teaching." That's kind of a big deal today; there's all kinds of theories and ideas, and there's a spiritual war going on in our world today, always has been. He says, "We will not be influenced when people try to trick us with lies so clever they sound like the truth." You know how that works. Sometimes there's just enough truth to make it sound really interesting. Instead, Paul says, "We will speak truth in love, growing in every way more and more like Christ, who is the head of the body, the church."

So whether you are thinking about the fact that you are the CEO, you're the president, you're the vice president, you're a director, you're a manager, you're an entrepreneur, or you're thinking about your Christian walk with God, you're thinking about your marriage, you're thinking about home, whatever is on your mind, all of these things that we'll be talking about in this podcast will be helpful both for you and for me.

So first of all, what is spiritual growth? What is spiritual maturity? Well, ultimately, the measure of both spiritual growth and maturity is Christ. It's Jesus Christ. That's why sometimes in the

world, we have this slang, "I'm not Jesus," "I'm not Christ," and sometimes we use his name in vain, we swear. In a dark way, it's a way of recognizing the name above all names, the name that is the standard.

So in today's terminology, what does spiritual growth look like? I'm going to give you a bunch of really quick ideas. First, it's increased self-awareness. When you grow spiritually, you will increase your own self-awareness. What you're feeling, how you're behaving, what that looks like, you're taking inventory of that. It is not a new statement; a statement has been made thousands of years ago even before Christ was on the Earth, where philosophers often said that the more you know God, the more you will know yourself, and the more you know yourself, the more you will know God. So again, if you're wondering whether you're growing spiritually, how well are you doing learning about yourself, being in touch with yourself? Increased self-awareness

Spiritual growth often begins with a deeper understanding of ourselves, so that involves, as far as practice, it looks like self-reflection, it looks like introspection, and it's simply a willingness to confront ourselves with our own strengths and weaknesses. So that's one. If you want to know whether you're growing spiritually, are you growing in your self-awareness, or are you like some who say, "Yeah, I'm self-aware"? You know, that sounds like you've arrived. "I'm self-aware." I don't think I'm always self-aware; sometimes I have to walk around myself in my mind's eye and say, "Why are you feeling this way?" I'll just be vulnerable; this morning I woke up and felt old.

Now, if you're watching this podcast, you're probably looking at me and saying, "Well, that's Jim, because you are old." I don't like feeling old; I don't want to get old. I'm in a little bit of a tug-of-war. Maybe right now, I'm going through a phase of not aging gracefully. I don't want to be 63 years old. I told my wife not long ago, minutes ago, really, I said, "Man, I would love to be 43 again. I would love that." But I'm not, and you know, part of being self-aware is even recognizing that I'm going through something right now, and I need to think about that. So one is increased self-awareness.

The second is enhanced compassion and empathy. If you're growing in your compassion for others and your empathy for others, then you're growing spiritually. As individuals grow spiritually, they simply become more compassionate and empathetic towards others. That's a byproduct of spiritual growth; it's not a byproduct of aging. You will run across all kinds of elderly people who have not grown spiritually; they're grumpy, they're grouchy, they're rude, they're mean. You know, they know the clock is ticking, I guess, and they become even more selfish. So people who are growing spiritually, they develop a greater capacity to understand and connect with the experiences and the sufferings of other people. So that's two things so far: self-awareness, increased self-awareness, enhanced compassion and empathy.

Here's the third: it's a greater sense of purpose. When you're growing spiritually, you have a greater sense of purpose. You should even be able to start articulating your purpose, or maybe I should say purposes if that is true for you. So spiritual growth often leads us to a clearer sense of what's important in life. We feel more connected to God; our faith is stronger, and we have

this broader, clearer sense of what's important and why we're here on the planet. So that's another symptom of what it looks like to be growing spiritually: a greater sense of purpose.

Another is increased mindfulness. Increased mindfulness - what do I mean by that? Well, many people who are on, who are clearly on a spiritual journey, meaning they're conscious of it, they're conscious of their growth, they are more present in the moment. Their mind isn't somewhere else. They realize that this moment, this environment, this place right now is important. And when you are present, mindfully present, it has a way of reducing stress in your life because you're not worrying about tomorrow, you're not dealing with all the would-have-could-have-should-have; you're really in the moment, and you're squeezing the best you can out of the moment. It also produces peace and contentment.

In fact, scripture says that if we are connected with God's spirit, there is fruit that comes from that, and peace is one of those examples of fruit. Increased self-awareness, enhanced compassion and empathy, a greater sense of purpose, increased mindfulness, and then a deeper connection with others. Spiritual growth often leads to not only the ability but the desire and the result of having a deeper connection with others. What we're talking about is meaningful relationships, interconnectedness, and a desire for authentic relationships. I think of relationships that are just at peace with one another, accepting of one another, being present for one another.

Here, the list is quite long, but I think this will help you. A lot of times, we'll hear things about my spiritual life, I'm a spiritual person, I think about spiritual things. Well, exactly what is that? We're making that list to hopefully make this a little more tangible so that we can think about and measure and do something about our spiritual growth.

The next is improved values and ethics. If you're growing spiritually, you're generally going to also improve in your awareness of and your practice of and your desire to live a life of value based upon values, even your leadership and ethics. We become more aligned with them, become aware of them, become more aware of why these values are important, and even how to apply them in our lives. Some will call them principles, and that's fine.

Here's another symptom of spiritual growth: gratitude and contentment. People who are growing spiritually, they are often leading a life of a sense of life's blessings, no matter how small. They're able to see things, smile at things, laugh at things, appreciate things. And again, a lot of that comes by living in the moment and being present in the moment. It's a sense of contentment and well-being.

Here's another one: people who are growing spiritually, they're just learners, right? They have a spirit of teachability, they have a curiosity about them, things that at one time in their life they probably weren't that interested in, but now they're interested, now they're wondering more about that. They're realizing how big life is, and it's so interesting in that way. So they seek wisdom from a variety of sources, not just their faith, but in science, in people, in humanities, all those things around them. And as a result, they tend to be growing personally.

People who are growing spiritually are often more involved in serving others, acts of service, not because they have to, but because they enjoy it and they see the need, and there's a longing to contribute to the well-being of others.

The other one, which is even more abstract, is that we're not afraid of what we call supernatural experiences or transcendent experiences. Now, for those of you out there who are poo-pooing this idea, just think about it logically for a minute. If you believe in a God and you believe that he's big enough to be small enough to care about you, to be engaged in your life, then is it really that strange to think that you might experience God at a transcendent level? Something that's deeply transformative, hard to explain sometimes, maybe a bit mystical. I would hope that you would open up your mind, your heart, and your spirit-- What other words could I use? You would just open up your whole self to that possibility that God can actually lead you in ways that are not always logical, can touch you in ways that transcend your senses, your five senses. I certainly want to be open to those kinds of things.

I use terminologies that you're familiar with today to try to explain what spiritual growth leading to spiritual maturity looks like: self-awareness, compassion, empathy, purpose, mindfulness, connectedness with others, values, ethics, gratitude, contentment, teachability, acts of service, and transcendent experiences.

What Biblical term could we use to describe spiritual growth other than comparing ourselves to Christ, becoming more like Christ? In my first book, where I was really talking about what it means to live a Christian life, I talked about four concepts: knowing Christ, following Christ, becoming like Him, which we kind of talked about at the beginning of this podcast, and then reproducing or radiating His life towards others and others so that the joy that we are experiencing with our faith would overflow and be a blessing to other people. But again, I gave you a lot of psychological terms, a lot of terms that are used today even in the business world and in the self-help world. But what does it mean to grow spiritually from a Biblical perspective? A biblical perspective.

Let me take you to Galatians chapter 5 verses 22 to 23. It says, "But the Holy Spirit produces," so this is a lot like spiritual growth. "The Holy Spirit produces this kind of fruit in our lives." Here we go, I kind of mentioned this earlier on. When we walk with God, he produces love in and through our lives, not just in but through our lives. They're for the plucking, so to speak. Think of a fruit tree, and we produce fruit that is not just benefiting us in blossoms, but also benefiting those that come by us and pluck the fruit from us: Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

And then Paul wraps that up by saying this, "There is no law against these things." I like the way he said that because in religion, there's a lot of fighting that goes on; in business, there's a lot of fighting that goes on; in the medical field, there's a lot of fighting that goes on; in the world of science, there's a lot of fighting that goes on; in the world of psychology, there's a lot of fighting that goes on; in the world of nations, there is a lot of positioning and posturing and fighting and capturing and kidnapping and threats. There's a lot. In the invisible world, there is a lot of

fighting going on. In our bodies, there is a lot of fighting going on. We have parts of our body that's fighting to stay healthy and yet there are contaminants that are trying to-- There's just a lot.

We live in a fallen world, and so there's a lot of rules that we have to live by for the sake of one another, but there's a lot of arguing about what rules are good. So what Paul is saying is when you lay this fruit on the table, love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control, that's a bowl of fruit where there's no law against those things. There's no law against these things, right? So that would be a biblical picture of what it means to be growing spiritually, that we would be producing this kind of fruit more and more and more and more and more.

Now, let me get to the second side of this podcast about spiritual growth and spiritual maturity. I'm reminded of something that Peter said in his second letter, in chapter 3, verse 18. There's actually an exhortation. Some might say, "Well, okay, you've described what spiritual growth looks like, and you even told us who the standard of spiritual growth is: Christ. But how do I actually grow, right?" What would be the use of this podcast if you said, "Okay, that's a cow," but here's what you do with the cow? So this is spiritual growth, and we're talking about spiritual maturity, but how?

Peter says, "Grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ." It's a command. In other words, there's effort that we need to take. There's intentionality in spiritual growth. We can't just meditate and let some supernatural experience happen to us, although we're all open to that. But there's typically no shortcuts in spiritual growth. It takes intentionality.

Let me talk to you today. Let me encourage you at the latter part of this podcast. There are really three things, and I'm then going to-- Well, I'm going to actually share four things, but three things are at the core of spiritual growth. They're going to be a little bit abstract, but I'm going to explain them as concretely as I can. The things that have helped me anyway, and in no way have I reached what I would call the summit of spiritual growth. But I want you all to know that like you, I am striving to be a better person. I'm striving to be a better Christian. I'm striving to be a better leader. I'm striving to be a better consultant and coach and pastor and teacher. But I'm also striving to be a better husband. I'm striving to be a better father to my grown children. I'm striving to be a better grandfather. I am striving to be more like Christ. So these things that I want to share with you now are kind of personal, but I find that they are consistent with Scripture, and I believe that you appreciate these as well.

The first one is that you have to spend time with God. You have to spend time with God. Paul wrote in Philippians 4, verse 5, he says, "The Lord is near." Now, some translations say that what Paul was trying to say is that Jesus is coming back. But the Bible also teaches us that God is omnipresent; He is Spirit; He is everywhere all at the same time. So, in that sense, He is near to me; He is near to you. In other words, if you do attend church, you will not find God inside the walls of that stained glass building any more than you will find Him at the desk at your office, out on the field in your work, at your dinner table, or driving down the road. In other words, one of the first things you can do to grow spiritually is to acknowledge that God is with you, that He is near with you. You could talk to Him just the way you could pick up the phone and talk to me.

And even though some might look at you funny, remember that God spoke things into existence. He did not think things into existence. Scripture says He spoke things into existence. Scripture also says that you and I remain in the image and the likeness of God, and therefore, it certainly at least implies. Well, the scripture does more than imply. Even with just that basic theology, it at least implies that when we talk to God, yes, we can talk to Him in our mind, yes, He can hear us that way. But there is something powerful about speaking to God as one man would speak to another, as one woman would speak to another.

So, as you're driving down the road, speak to Him. Say, "God, I acknowledge that You are with me. I believe that You are with me. I believe that You're in this car with me. I believe that You are on this treadmill with me. I believe that You're with me as I'm thinking through my calendar, as I'm thinking through my appointments, as I'm working through this problem, as I'm in this conflict. As I'm trying, God, grant me wisdom. Help me in this way." This practice is just to recognize that God isn't somewhere that you have to go get Him; He's right there with you. And He's waiting for you to engage with Him.

Now, this might sound kind of weird to you, but He's talking to you, but you might not be able to hear Him. I'm going to talk about why you can't hear Him, because that's the second thing I want to share with you. But the first is to spend time with God. I don't know that we have the capacity to always remember that God's with us. We might be a little short in that area. But as much as you can remember consciously, every single day, every hour of everyday, every minute of everyday, if you could acknowledge His presence is with you, you're going to grow spiritually. You're going to grow spiritually because you're going to be relying on the spirit versus on the physical. And that is critically important.

I hope that encourages you because you can do that. You might say, "Jim, I don't have that kind of faith." You've got enough faith to try. You do. You have enough faith to try. If you've never been to Sunday school, you've still got enough faith to try. You've been in the mountains; you've looked up at the stars in the sky; you've said to yourself, "My goodness, I'm not sure that just happened. There's got to be somebody, something behind that. Wow."

The second thing, before my voice gets too hoarse today, is not just time with God, but time with God but time in God's word. For those of you who are new to that concept, God's word is the Bible. The Bible, if you don't own a Bible, I would encourage you to get one. I know everyone's got one on their phone; that's wonderful. And maybe I'm just a little too old school, but get an actual Bible. Get a paper Bible. Read through it. Get some grease pencils that you can mark. Begin to read.

If you are not familiar with scripture, get yourself a Bible, or you know what? Contact me. You know how to get ahold of me. We don't hide any of that information. My email is [jim@leadtodaycommunity.com](mailto:jim@leadtodaycommunity.com). If you want some coaching on the right kind of Bible, I can give you a little bit right now. You can get them on Amazon. The New Living Translation, New Living Translation is an actual translation. It's not a word-for-word translation; it's what we call an idiomatic translation. I have a personal friend who is part of that translation committee, who did that. Somebody I sat under and learned under in seminary, Mark Strauss, who is a scholar.

People like him have put that translation together. Linguistics is very important. Get the New Living Translation.

And I would say maybe start reading in the book of Genesis. That will blow your mind. SO you could start reading the Gospel of John, which is in the New Testament. Genesis at the very beginning. You can also read the book of Proverbs. I still practice reading the chapter in Proverbs every day that corresponds to the day of the month. So, if it's the 10th of the month, I read the 10th chapter of Proverbs. Proverbs is a book about wisdom. It helps me in my coaching and what I do.

When I talk about "spend time in God's Word," in the book of Psalm, Chapter 1, it says regarding the godly and the spiritually growing, it says these are people who delight in the law of the Lord, which is another title for the Bible. "They delight in the law of the Lord, and they meditate on it day and night. They are like trees planted along the riverbank." Why? Because their roots are always getting nourished by the water, "bearing fruit," and here comes that word again, "fruit each season, their leaves never wither, and everything that they do prospers." That's Psalm Chapter 1, verses 2 and 3.

In fact, Romans Chapter 12, verse 2 says that the way that we transform our lives is by the renewing of our mind, and the best way to renew our mind is to regulate what we are consuming, the content that we are consuming. Which, of course, I can't think of any better. I love reading books. For those of you who are watching, I'm in one of my offices, and I have volumes and volumes of books. My grandkids say, "Papa, do you read all those books?" And maybe I don't read every book from cover to cover, but the books that stay in my library, they're resources, and I've read this chapter or that chapter. But yes, most of them I have read from cover to cover because I learn.

But as good as a lot of these books are, I'm working on another book right now, nothing can compare to the Bible. And so, now, let me explain how one and two go together. The more time you spend in God's Word, the more you will be able to discern whether you are hearing that these thoughts you're having are from God or from fear or from negativity or from darkness. You can pick the words or from your wounds. All those kinds of things. In other words, when you're driving down the road and you're trying to have a conversation with God, you will do better when you are spending time in God's Word because God's Word is alive. It's not just a book. The Bible tells us that it's alive and active.

So, I'm trying to increase your faith and the reasoning for why you should be in the Word. So, number one, if you want to grow spiritually, with all those things we talked about, spend time with God and number two, spend time in God's Word so that you can hear His voice when you are getting thoughts. Are those your thoughts? Are those God's thoughts? Are those your neighbor's thoughts? Are those the sound bites that you get on our crazy media today? I mean, people who even listen to the media-- Okay, well, I'm not going to get on that.

All right, so time with God, time in God's Word, and three, time with God's people. I know that in a lot of our lives, we can't always choose who we're going to be with. Sometimes our

workplaces dictate who's going to be around us. Sometimes our neighborhood does. Traffic tests, right? That's all the more why we need to be intentional about the kind of people we break bread with, the kind of people that we spend time with, the kind of people we wrestle with deeper things in our lives. You want to spend time with God's people, with people like you who are pursuing spirituality, pursuing God. Even if you're not a Christian, but you're pursuing the Creator, you're pursuing that. God will bless that. Go, go, go. And also, surround yourself with people who are pursuing God.

Again, in the Christian Scriptures, in the New Testament, in Hebrews, the name of the book is Chapter 10, verse 25, it says, "And let us not neglect meeting together as some people do, but encourage one another." In other words, get in a Bible study. Get into a church. Listen to the Today Counts podcast and others like it. But encourage one another, especially now that the day of His return is drawing near. We know that the world continues to change, and it's changing at a more rapid pace than ever in the history of mankind. And that's because of our advances, our technologies, power, money, weapons. The world is changing faster. You know, when we all went through COVID together, and I know COVID is still around, but we went through it together. I was listening to a lot of podcasts, listening to very intelligent people. And I'll never forget what I heard one person say about COVID. It says, "COVID hasn't done anything to change the world. It has not done anything. What it has done is it has accelerated what was already in play." It's an accelerator. So, disease is an accelerator, technology is an accelerator, war is an accelerator. Even good inventions are an accelerator. All these things that are driving us to this crazy place that we're at today, and I'm not a doomsdayer, but if we know God's Word, we know where this eventually goes. But thank God that He is in control.

So, I've shared three things of how to grow spiritually. I've listed all kinds of symptoms or examples of what spiritual growth looks like. We've talked about Christ being the standard of maturity. We've talked about how Paul describes spiritual growth in the fruit of the Spirit, with all those things we talked about: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, self-control. We've talked about those things. But there's one last thing I want to leave you with today, and I hope this encourages you as much as everything that you heard today about growing spiritually and in leadership.

Now, in leadership, one of the things I've noticed as I've had the opportunity to coach Christian leaders, ministry leaders, church leaders, but also multi-billion dollar C-suite leaders, is that what seems to differentiate one leader from another is not always skill sets, believe it or not, but it's their spiritual strength. And let me put it in street terms: it's their ability to handle pressure. It's their ability to carry weight. Where some people will crumble under the weight of something, some people will blow up under certain pressure. Some will quit; some will run; all of these things happen when we are spiritual lightweights, let's say. But as we grow through the ranks, where we come from a lightweight to a middleweight, a welterweight, to a heavyweight, you want to be heavyweights, not physically, but spiritually we want to be.

But let me share this last idea with you: time and intentionality is the fourth I would say. I've already talked about time; time with God, time in God's word, and time with God's people. You've got to invest in those things to grow. Time is part of the equation; the other part of the



equation is intentionality. You've got to be intentional. If you want to have a better relationship at home with your spouse, you've got to be intentional. You've got to demonstrate small acts of kindness and big acts of kindness. You've got to love; you've got to forgive; you've got to invest in yourself; you've got to give yourself. It's not a 50-50 proposition; it never has been. If you seek God out, you will find Him.

Lastly, I will close with this. This is really important. Spiritual growth is not a straight line, folks. It's a jagged line. It's up and down and sideways. There are valleys; there are mountains; there are obstacles; there are difficulties; there are victories; there are "aha" moments. There are all of those things. Recognize that it's not a sprint; it is truly a journey. So, for all of you who listen to the Today Counts show because of our leadership principles, because of the guests that we interview, because of our Christian worldview, thank you for listening. Share this podcast with others. God bless you, and I can't wait to talk to you soon.

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