

I'm very excited to have Opus with us from Collegedale Academy. My cousin Brenden was in Opus last year and graduated and I was privileged to see the spring concert for this group in Collegedale in May of this year. When I was in college, I worked as a reader for Mrs. Kilgore at Collegedale Academy and I used to attend a church service held there as well. So having Collegedale Academy here brings back lots of memories from college as well as a lot of the college classmates who now live in Orlando. I feel like I'm stepping back in time a little bit.

This is the second weekend in a row that I've had a bit of time-warp. Last weekend I was in Illinois to attend the wedding of a great friend of mine from grade-school. Lots of old classmates were back, some of them I hadn't seen in over 15 years and it was just great to catch up with everyone. I'm sure you're hoping this entire sermon isn't going to be a stroll down memory lane for me, and it isn't. But our message today and my visitation of yesteryear are related.

How many of you got measured when you were younger? You know, the pencil marks on the wall that charted your growth? We all wanted to grow desperately you know, to get past that previous mark on the wall. But it took so long. Or how many of you have exercised to gain muscle or lose weight? Probably have a few less hands on that question, but, those of you that have exercised, whether or not you raised your hands, you know it's a slow process.

As humans we don't tend to like slow processes. We want it now. So we buy the cliff notes, we scroll to the spoilers, we take a pill, we take a short cut, we fast-forward through the commercials, we walk around someone, we pass someone, if it's supposed to cook for 3 minutes, 2:30 will probably be good enough. IT'S TOO SLOW! By skipping through some of these things we've trained ourselves to get fast results, with little to no work. I'm curious to know how that mindset affects our spirituality.

We've been talking about spirituality the last couple weeks, what it isn't and what it is. Last week, Pastor Andy dealt with the insecurity that sometimes grips us as we look at someone who has a very dramatic, at least by human standards, conversion to Christ. But the bottom line is, anyone turning to Christ, regardless of the circumstances, is dramatic and powerful. And, more importantly, we don't have degrees of Christians, a Christian who speaks up front is not more important or valuable than a Christian who takes care of behind the scenes things—if we are fulfilling the call that Christ has given us we are right where we need to be which is no better or no worse than anyone else.

So how do we grow in a situation like that? If we're the all the same, if everything is all good, what's the motivation? I'm saved by faith in Christ. Game over? If we setup a plan and a process for growth, is that forced or are we nurturing our spiritual growth? How do we go about setting up a plan? How do we measure success? And, the most important question, are all of those other questions healthy or legalistic? This morning, my premise is that the growth of spirituality is often a slow process that must be cultivated and measured, not to record success, but to show change.

I invite you to open your Bibles if you have them to Philippians 3:12-16. This is a powerful couple verses of scripture and I want to take some to look at what Paul, the author of this letter to the church in Philippi, was saying.

In verse 12 Paul says that he hasn't attained his goal but is pressing on to achieve that goal. How did he know he hadn't achieved his goal? Was he just saying he hadn't achieved his goal so that he didn't seem egotistical? No, he had a goal in mind and was able

to determine whether or not he had reached that goal because he had measureable methods, whether it was something that he quantified or qualified.

Oftentimes people view baptism as the final step, that at that point they have reached the goal of Christianity and there's basically nothing left to do but wait things out till the second coming. But how do we grow in that situation? If that is the approach the only thing that then matters is doing what is right and not doing what is wrong and asking for forgiveness when we do mess up. In that mindset we're just trying to keep the status quo.

Christianity isn't about keeping the status quo. We are saved by our faith in Christ and it is relationship with him that sustains and grows that faith. My wife, Gina and I have been here for almost two months. Prior to moving here I spent some time with a lot of the staff here in our interview trip and a few weeks later to find a place to live. However, my relationship with them has grown and deepened the more we spend time together every day. I trust them more and more every day. If those relationships stayed the same it would make for pretty awkward situations. If two people got married but never knew each other deeper than they did on their first date--that just seems weird.

Last weekend as I was visiting with old grade school classmates who I hadn't seen in years, some of them since we were in grade school, our relationship was stunted. In a decade plus, there had been zero interaction, and us young adults tried as hard as we could, to bring our relationships up to speed.

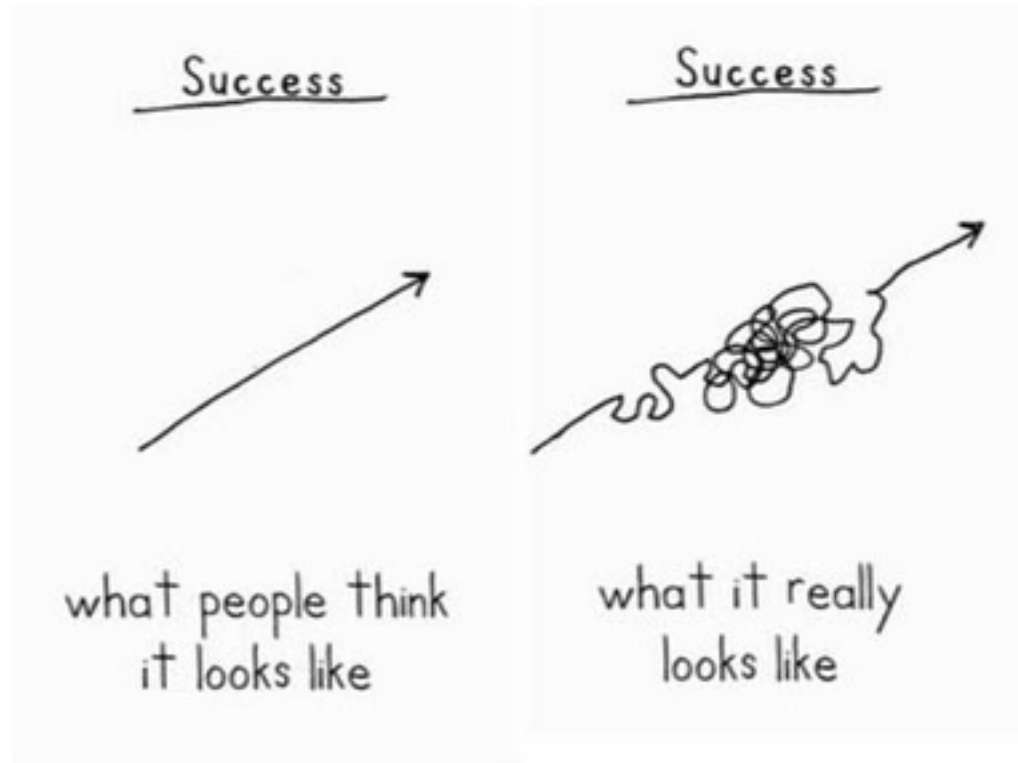
As I'm standing there talking with a close friend, watching him tend to his two kids it was strange to see him in that light. Our relationship consisted of playing video games, canball, and capture the flag. Yet there we were, with wives, jobs and he had kids. It was like a bunch of 13 year olds standing around playing adult. Relationships don't work unless we're working at them. So if it's not about keeping the status quo, what's Paul's goal?

Going back to Philippians, Paul tells us what his goal was in verse 10. There's a lot in those two verses I like and that challenge me. Paul, one of the biggest contributors to the New Testament, did not know Christ fully? Going back to our sermon from last week we see that one Christian isn't more important than another because we're all on the track of trying to know Christ deeper, whether we're writing the New Testament or flipping burgers.

I find the last part of verse 11 the most powerful. Paul hoped to be a part of the resurrection, somehow. There was part of his plan and goal that he didn't understand; that he didn't know how it would happen; part of his plan that required faith. Paul's plan was measureable, if we look at verse 13, because he says that he hasn't completed his goal. So, going back to my premise for the morning, that the growth of spirituality is often a slow process that must be cultivated and measured, not to record success, but to show change, I think Paul shows us that we must have a goal, and a way to measure that goal.

The bottom line though, is that we're human, we're imperfect, we're going to make mistakes. Verse 13 tells us that mistakes will be part of it, or least I assert that. Paul says that he intentionally forgets what is behind. You don't want to forget most of the life that you live--part of the frustration of getting older is not being able to remember names, numbers and life lived. What we intentionally forget are the things that drag us down, mistakes that we've made, the things that disappoint us, the disappointments we've caused others.

Now, don't get me wrong, we're able to learn from those mistakes and disappointments, but dwelling on them does us no good. Again looking back at the premise, the growth of spirituality is often a slow process that must be cultivated and measured, not to record success, but to show change, a key idea there is that the measuring of our growth is not done in success, but in the change of relationship. Below is a picture that deals with what we're talking about.



I think this picture does a good job at summing up our spiritual walk. We like to imagine that everything can just go on this straight line, but really, that's not how it works. We sometimes take a step forward, and sometimes take a step back, but all of those steps are part of the journey that, if we choose to keep taking, will bring us closer to Christ. And that, can often times be overwhelmingly frustrating.

If you go into homes with small children you can probably find a piece of wall with some pencil marks that charts the growth of the kids. I'm pretty sure that if the parents allowed it, the kids would get measured every day and maybe even several times a day. In my family the first height milestone was my great-aunt, Fay. I'm not even sure she was over 5 feet. Once I got close to her, I thought for sure, today is the day that I'm taller than her. She lived less than a mile away from my family out in the sticks and my younger brother and I were over at her place all the time. I remember standing back to back with her every chance I got because I was sure that I had grown just a little bit from the day before.

Most days that we measured, nothing had changed as far as my height was concerned, I was still 3 inches or 2 inches or 5 inches short. But that doesn't mean that nothing was happening. I was growing. But some of that growth had nothing to do with me. My body was just doing what it does. Sure, I ate and drank, slept, took care of myself, which

at that age meant mom and dad taking care of me, but they didn't make my cells grow. There was a work being done that we had nothing to do with.

Our spiritual growth is the same way. Sure, there are things we can do to help growth, but there is also a work happening that we have no control over. Philippians 1:6. Christ started that work in you and will carry it through to completion. We can help and we can hinder.

This plant has been sitting up here all morning. It was a gift from some good friends of mine. Has this plant grown this morning? Have you seen it grow? Can you tell that it's grown? We know that it has grown, that something in its biology has changed in the time we've been here, but I haven't done anything directly to make it grow. I water it every couple days, I make sure it gets sun, I make sure its taken care of, but also have faith that the things that are beyond my understanding will happen.

I want us this morning to ponder our plan and how we measure it. Spiritual growth doesn't happen by accident. If you don't have a plan I invite you develop one. If you don't have a way to measure change, I invite you to develop something.

For those of you who love structure and planning, this should be something easy to do. Here's what you need to understand, for me, the thought of sitting down and planning something like that makes me cringe a little bit. It would make me feel claustrophobic and tied in to something. It would feel like it was less genuine or less dynamic. So for those of you who hear "plan something out" and cringe, I understand.

I want to share a couple things with you in closing. Once again, we're going back to the wedding weekend extravaganza from last weekend. I really haven't changed a whole lot. Or at least I didn't think that I had. But as I was talking with all these people I hadn't seen in so long, and we recounted all that had happened in the last 15 years, I started realizing that I had changed a lot and the more we told the more I saw how much so. If I had never had an opportunity to recount, I never would have seen the change.

A few years ago I started keeping a prayer journal. It's purpose was pretty simple, I couldn't always remember when people asked me to pray for them, and I couldn't always remember what they asked me to pray about. So I started this prayer journal to be able to remember.

A few months ago I was talking with a good friend of mine who has a few entries in my journal, specific requests that deal with typical life--work, family, and the future. When I prayed that day I was just struck and started rejoicing over how God had worked mightily in those situations over the previous two years. Some of the requests had been answered, some had not, others had been worked out better than what he had hoped. These were big requests, serious requests, and as we were chatting online and I recounted all these answered prayers, his response struck me. He said thanks for the reminder. Life had gone on, and those requests were kind of forgotten. With the reminder though, we could see the hand of God.

Thinking back to our premise for the morning, we don't measure things to see success, because we don't always know what success is. One of my friends' requests had to do with a job that he didn't get. At the time we wouldn't have viewed that as a success. But things changed for the better and it was a good thing he didn't get that job.

Spirituality is a slow process that must be cultivated and measured, not to record success, but to show change. I don't know what your growth plan looks like. I stumbled on one of my core measuring sticks. But I want to challenge you to find a way to cultivate and

measure your spiritual growth so that you can see God's working in your life and grow deeper in your relationship with Him.

As you leave this morning there are some handouts at the back to help you think through your spiritual growth. I invite you to take one, meet with some family, meet with some friends or if you want to do it on your own, go over the questions and come up with a plan.