



# Core Values

## Week 3: Spiritual Growth

Brian Mattson - 08/17/2025

I'm going to break some news this morning. If you are standing, please take a seat. If you have asthma, puff that inhaler real quick. Don't shoot the messenger. Ok. Here goes. We are a church. If that is surprising to you, first, are you sure you are in the right place? Secondly, this next Core Value we are going to discuss goes hand-in-hand with being a church. Today we're talking about Spiritual Growth and why it's an integral part of our decision making here.

You might think you know exactly what I, or any other pastor, might say regarding Spiritual Growth. It's one of those no-brainer, churchy words that seems like it needs very little explanation, which, let's face it, is probably true. Churches, perhaps more than anything, are recognized as places that feed our spirits. Even the way we defined this Core Value back in 2014 doesn't scream any unique characteristic that could be only recognized as the way The Downtown Church addresses Spiritual Growth. Here is our definition:

**Spiritual Growth: We will provide opportunities for each person to grow as a follower of Jesus Christ throughout all the seasons of their life.**

It's kind of a boring definition, but let's dive a little deeper. There's an important distinction between Spiritual Growth and Spiritual Completion. We

are not here to help you end your spiritual journey. In fact, if you believe you have completed that journey, I'm not sure you were on the right road to begin with. The founder of Methodism, John Wesley, took seriously the charge from Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount to "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect." But, c'mon... perfect? That sounds a lot like completion. Something that's perfect doesn't need anything else. In fact, don't change anything about it. It's. Perfect.

Wesley believed that we could attain perfection in this life. Even today, when we ordain new pastors in the United Methodist Church, the Bishop asks them, "Are you going on to perfection?" and to finish the ordination process, the candidate must say, "Yes, with God's help." I've seen this question asked for years now, and I've come to the conclusion that if any of my superiors in the denomination ask me questions about my ministry, I will simply respond by saying, "Yes, with God's help." Apparently, that is the correct response. The right answer.

Having the right answer feels good, doesn't it? I would contend that having the right answer has become the #1 priority for Americans. The flip side of that is if you aren't right, you must be wrong. To win an argument, you must be right. And winning arguments, persuading people to agree with our point of view, is the way we measure success. The right answer, the correct response, is the perfect solution. Perfection, it would seem, is key to happiness.

I think this is mostly a byproduct of our modern minds. We've thrown nuance and empathy out the window for the allure of certainty. Our news programs are now filled with pundits trying to probe their guests for "gotcha" moments. We watch Senate inquiries doing the same, talking over and down to people, and clamoring for a "yes or no response" to a complex question that has no objective right or wrong answer.

This modern mindset has permeated into our religious circles too. If you don't believe the same things as I do, then you are wrong. If you don't pray, sing, or preach how I do, then you are missing the mark. I see clips online of preachers and worship services that claim they are doing Christianity the right way. What I hear is that if you follow these people, these steps, you too will discover the right answers. Why have we boiled down a life of faith to having the correct answers? Or knowing all the answers?

When I was 13, I thought I knew everything. And then I turned 14. When I was 23, I thought maybe I had finally learned everything because I was getting married. Then I turned 24. When I was 28, I remember being in the backyard with my wife. Our dog was laying in the grass chewing on a stick. Our garden was bursting with flowers and vegetables. We were throwing a baseball back and forth on a beautiful day and I thought *I want time to stop right now. This is perfect.*

And it was. At that moment, it was perfect. But that's not how life works. Our days keep going until they don't. We can't pause time, and even if I could, think of all the things I found out were even better on the other side of that moment? Kids, jobs, friends. I've found the same nugget of truth about my own spiritual growth.

When I took Confirmation as a 6th grader, I assumed that meant I graduated from church and could boldly say in front of the congregation that I now knew everything. My teacher marched me up the steps onto the platform. The pastor handed me a Bible and smiled. It seemed pretty official. I thought to myself, *I must really know everything about church now.* Afterwards, I got a lot of cards with \$20 dollar bills. This sure seemed a lot like graduation. I had to memorize a couple of the ancient statements of faith, the Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed, during the course of Confirmation, so what else could there be to uncover? A lot, apparently, because I sure had plenty of questions running around my head my sophomore year of high school. I couldn't even

remember the Nicene Creed, for goodness sake! Maybe that was the source of all the answers.

As the years passed by and I continued to lean into my faith, I'll be honest it ebbed and flowed. More ebb during those college years, if I'm being truthful. But the journey meandered. At times it was an odd journey. Some days it was like a stroll down a familiar sidewalk. Other times, it was bushwacking through the wilderness. But I found something on the other side. It was uncomfortable at first. Squishy, but with some firmness, like that slime kids were obsessed with making a few years ago. And after lots of questions, podcasts, books, and conversations I realized I was okay with not knowing all the answers. In fact, I was more than okay. I was set free. God became bigger. Jesus became more challenging, but more fulfilling. The Spirit became... realer?

I guess there's no good way to describe what it has been like to live on the other side, but I'm absolutely sure I still don't have all the answers—or at least all the right answers. But curiosity and learning are more than passengers on the ride. They are guides. I've learned that spiritual growth never ends. This is a quality that is repeatedly lifted up in scripture. One of my very favorite characters in the New Testament embodied Spiritual Growth. His name is Nicodemus.

We've talked about him recently, because he shows up in the Gospel of John, but his story is a beautiful reminder that spiritual growth is a continual process. Perhaps one we never complete.

The first mention of Nicodemus comes in John 3 after Jesus flipped the tables and scattered the moneylenders at the temple in Jerusalem. Nicodemus visits Jesus at night to ask some questions in the cover of darkness. His curiosity is showing. The reason he visits Jesus at night is not only to align with the author's themes of light and darkness. It's because he is part of the Jewish ruling class. He is a Pharisee, an influential group Jewish interpreters

that kept to a strict rule of law. And even more than that, Nicodemus was part of the Sanhedrin, which in simplistic terms was kind of like the Pharisees' Supreme Court. Nicodemus had stature and authority. His was a trusted voice on Mosaic Law, social life, and religious interpretation. But even in such a lofty role, he didn't assume he had all the answers, or at least all the right answers.

When he visited Jesus at night, he asked *how can one be born again?* Jesus responded by talking of being born anew, of water and spirit, and Nicodemus poses another question:

**Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?" Jesus answered him, "Are you the teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?"**  
**- John 3:9-10**

Nicodemus walks away with questions, I'm sure, which is a good thing on a spiritual journey. He pops up again in the gospel four chapters later. Jesus has done something to offend the ruling class again, surprise surprise. What is it with this guy?

Anyway, the Pharisees—remember, these are Nicodemus's peeps—are all in a tizzy after Jesus teaches in the temple and the people are amazed. The temple police are amazed. People are starting to ask if he could be the Messiah. And if the Messiah is walking around, that's a direct threat to the Pharisees. So the Pharisees do what anyone in power does when threatened. They intend to arrest and sentence Jesus before he even gets a trial. *That's* when Nicodemus sticks his neck out. Here's how it plays out in scripture as the authorities report back to the Pharisees.

**Then the temple police went back to the chief priests and Pharisees, who asked them, "Why did you not arrest him?" The police answered, "Never has anyone spoken like this!" Then the Pharisees replied, "Surely you have not been deceived, too, have**

**you? Has any one of the authorities or of the Pharisees believed in him? But this crowd, which does not know the law, they are accursed.” Nicodemus, who had gone to Jesus before and who was one of them, asked, “Our law does not judge people without first giving them a hearing to find out what they are doing, does it?” They replied, “Surely you are not also from Galilee, are you? Search and you will see that no prophet is to arise from Galilee.”**  
**- John 7:45-52**

Nicodemus is no longer avoiding risk by asking his questions in darkness. He’s asking his questions in front of *his* people. And in return, they question Nicodemus by basically saying *What is wrong with you? Are you feeling alright? Surely you aren’t one of this accursed crowd too?*

I may, for just one moment, try and characterize the feeling and emotion of this scene with my limited understanding: what the Pharisees are really saying in this scene is that they’ve already discovered all the right answers. There’s nothing else to explore or uncover. They are right and if you have questions, you are wrong.

There was a powerful moment in my spiritual journey that caused quick growth. I had a pastor tell me once, “If you ever find a pastor who tells you they have all the right answers, run the other way.” That made me think. If this guy doesn’t have all the answers, maybe it’s up to me to discover some of the answers on my own. Maybe I need to have a little ownership for my Spiritual Growth.

I’m wondering if something similar happened to Nicodemus. I wonder if he heard how the Pharisees were talking and he ran the other way. Because the final time we read about him is at Jesus’s burial. He helps prepare Jesus’s body with linen and spices and lays it in a tomb. His spiritual journey took a most unexpected turn. But what a beautiful new direction he went.

Perhaps the most famous evangelist in the history of Christendom had his own interesting spiritual journey. Paul, another Pharisee, had a mystical encounter with Jesus, and changed the world. Through his missionary expeditions and letters that fill our New Testament, he still encourages us today to continue on a path of Spiritual Growth. Because when things quit growing, they tend to start dying. But we always have the ability to be renewed. To expand our thoughts and ideas.

In his most famous letter, Paul writes in Romans 12 to continue growing. To continue seeking wisdom. To continue the transformational process of learning to live and love like Jesus did. Here are his words:

**I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, on the basis of God's mercy, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your reasonable act of worship. Do not be conformed to this age, but be transformed by the renewing of the mind, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.**

**- Romans 12:1-2**

So here we are again. Perfection. Is that the goal Paul lays out for us? After I told you all that perfection is a byproduct of our modern way of thinking, here's Paul, straight from the ancient Near-East to tell you otherwise. But what he's saying here is actually that we don't have to be perfect, but we are to continually seek the will of God. That is perfection. To continually be renewed, transformed, challenged, and reminded that seeking after God—spiritual growth—is an ongoing, neverending process.

As I said earlier, John Wesley thought we could get to the end of that journey in this life. But I love what retired Bishop Will Willimon says to further this way of thinking: "Wesley took seriously Jesus's invitation to 'be ye therefore perfect as your Father which is in heaven is perfect. By 'perfection,' Wesley

did not mean moral flawlessness or sinlessness. He meant perfection in the sense of maturity."

So are you going on to perfection? I am, with God's help, of course, but what I mean is that spiritual "perfection" is being willing to take part in the process of learning, growing, and loving like Jesus. There are so many ways for you to take an active role in your own Spiritual Growth here at The Downtown Church. There are easy onramps to get back on this journey if you've taken a break. There are ways to challenge yourself if you feel stuck. And there are paths to take you even deeper if you feel like you've got all the answers. Because I know I don't have them all. So I'm going to continue to dig, and in the digging, I will continue to discover new and endless ways to know my Creator. I hope that you will dig with me.

Perhaps in one of our Confirmation classes, you can put your shovel to the ground and know God in a deeper way. Or maybe you will hear something at our Wednesday morning study that will widen your understanding of grace. It could mean tuning out social media when you wake up or the national news at breakfast to read a devotional, or use an app for some guided meditation. Because we are a church, for goodness sake. Spiritual growth, the knowing-God-more, seeking-to-follow-Jesus, listening-to-the-Spirit stuff... that's what we're all about.