

Ingredients of Growth

By Henry Cloud, Ph.D.

Some of the saddest scenarios that I have heard over the years as a counselor are the ones involving people who have honestly tried their best to grow in some area, or overcome some problem, and despite their best efforts, have been unable to succeed. It breaks my heart to see that happen. Sometimes, it is a necessary step of spiritual growth in and of itself, for it brings the person to the end of themselves and their own power and gets them dependent on God for the first time. Or it breaks their self-sufficiency in some other way, and that can be very helpful.

But other times, it is from a lack of knowledge and understanding of how growth takes place, or from bad teaching about how growth takes place, and as the Bible says, “my people are destroyed from lack of knowledge.” (Hosea 4:6) When that takes place, it is a very sad picture, because often the people involved are really trying to overcome something in their lives and sincerely doing all that they know to do. The good news is that when they do discover what has been missing in the process, they begin to experience the growth and change that they had been looking for, and find out that God is alive and real after all.

Maybe you can identify with a time like that, or maybe you are in a time like that at present. Or, maybe you are growing and things are working, but you don't really know why. In any case, it can be very helpful to understand the ingredients that have to be present for growth to take place, for several reasons:

- If you are stuck in some problem or pattern, you can find out the missing ingredient and begin to change the way that you are going about the process
- If you have succeeded before, you can find out why so the next time you hit a difficult time period you will know what to do
- If you are growing now, you can understand why so that you can insure that the growth continues
- If you are in the process of helping someone else to grow, you can do it right

Whatever the case, this issue is designed to help you understand the process of growth itself and the ingredients that must be present for it to work.

Grace, Truth and Time

Whenever God has intervened in human history to redeem us and to help us, he does it with three ingredients: grace, truth and time. In fact, these three ingredients can be seen in the very nature of the person of Jesus and what he did with us. As John describes Him and what he did, he says the following:

The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth. (John 1:14)

The very character of Jesus is one that includes exactly what we need to grow: grace and truth. And when He came to visit us and intervene in our lives, He dwelt with us. He spent time in the process with us and still does even now. Ever since the Garden of Eden when we fell away from Him, He has had a plan that included His grace, His truth, and a lot of time to work it out. Let's look at those ingredients specifically.

Grace

What is grace? Simply stated, it is unmerited favor. It is when someone is on our side, is for us instead of against us, and is showing favor towards us that is unmerited. In other words, there is nothing that you do to gain it. It is given freely.

In terms of God, it has to do with His relational character, that He is a God of love. He desires relationship with us, and He gives it freely to us. He desires to connect and be with us, and because of His grace, He desires to give to us and to help us. Whenever we are growing, it is because God is bestowing some gift of grace to us in some various form, and that gift is something that is unearned. It may be the gift of love shown in salvation and forgiveness. Or it may be the gift of a talent that He has bestowed on you.

It may be an opportunity to take a class or to have an experience, or it may be the love of a person. God's gifts of grace come in many forms to us, through direct intervention by Him, or through His use of people in our lives. As Peter tells us, when we are receiving love and help from other people, that is the grace of God being given to us. (1 Peter 4:10)

Whatever the form of grace that you have or need in your process, the essence of grace must be present: unmerited favor. What that means is that you need people and support in your growth process who are for you and not against you. You need some people and God on your side no matter how you are doing. That is the unmerited part of grace. When you are growing, if getting help depends on your performance, that is a catch-22. You have to have help to get better, and if you have to get better to get the help, you don't have a chance.

So, in evaluating your system of growth, you must ask yourself the question am I getting help and support that is going to be there regardless of how I am doing? Help that I do not have to earn? This is getting the nutrients that we need in order to grow from outside of ourselves, from God and His people. There are many aspects of this help described in the Bible, too many to name here. But here is a short list of some of the more basic ways that we experience grace in the growth process:

- Unconditional acceptance and forgiveness from God and other people (1 John 1:9; James 5:16)
- Support and encouragement when we are too weak to make it on our own (1 Thess. 5:11,14; Ecc. 4:9-11; Heb. 10:25)
- Modelling and the imparting skills in living from others (Heb. 13:7;)
- Correction and instruction (Lev. 19:17)

There are many forms of God's grace that people possess to give to you through their gifts (1 Peter 4:10). If you are going to be growing, you must make sure that these elements of grace are present in your system of growth for change to take place. You must be in some place of unmerited favor for growth to happen. You must find a place of unconditional love and acceptance.

Truth

What is truth? The simplest way to think of truth is in terms of reality. Reality is truth, and the ultimate reality is God's Truth that He has given us in His perfect law. He has described His reality in ways that we can understand it and in ways that can heal us and help us to grow. His Truth is a prescription for us to live. Since He is life and has created life, then He best understands it and how it is to be lived. His Truth and precepts are the way to ultimate life.

I like the way that Moses explained God's truth to the people of his time:

In the future, when your son asks you, "What is the meaning of the stipulations, decrees and laws the LORD our God has commanded you?" tell him: "We were slaves of Pharaoh in Egypt, but the LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand. Before our eyes the LORD sent miraculous signs and wonders—great and terrible—upon Egypt and Pharaoh and his whole household. But he brought us out from there to bring us in and give us the land that he promised on oath to our forefathers. The LORD commanded us to obey all these decrees and to fear the LORD our God, so that we might always prosper and be kept alive, as is the case today. And if we are careful to obey all this law before the LORD our God, as he has commanded us, that will be our righteousness." (Deut. 6:20-25)

He basically told them that the meaning of God's truth was to help them live. It would protect them and cause their lives to be better. So, in terms of the ingredients of growth, we can see why His truth is a crucial component. God's truth structures our lives. It gives the shape to our character and our existence, showing us the way that we are to be and to live.

For any system of growth to work, it must include God's truth. We must be getting it in some sort of systematic and experiential way for it to do its work in our lives. As David said, "I will never forget your precepts, for by them you have preserved my life. (Ps. 119:93). For His truth to preserve our life, we must never forget them and for that to happen we must be getting exposed to God's truth on a regular basis.

There are many ways for us to do that. Here are some common ones:

- Individual Bible study
- Group studies
- Preaching and teaching
- Reading and studying good materials that teach God's truth
- Confrontation by friends with God's truth

All of these are ways that we can learn His ways. But hearing his truth is only part of the matter. The other aspect is putting it into practice. That is the only way that we can ever really know the truth of God. As Jesus said, wise is the person who not only hears His word, but puts it into practice. (Lk. 6:47) For the truth to have its effect in our lives, we must be practicing it as well.

Our Truth

There is more reality than the precepts of God, however. There is the reality of who we are in light of his truth, which is the truth of our struggles and imperfections, and this truth needs to be present in our system of growth as well. If we are hiding our reality, then it is not being effected by the grace that God gives to our struggles, pain, and needs. We must bring our reality and the truth of who we are into relationship with grace, with God and with others. Listen to the following verses:

- Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting. (Ps. 139:23,24)
- If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. (1 John 1:9)
- Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. (James 5:16)

For grace to effect our struggling realities, those realities need to be brought into the light of God's Grace and be compared to His truth. Then we begin to feel His acceptance, when we understand who we are in light of who we need to be, and the fact that He and others love us anyway. That love then empowers us to be sorry for who we are, and motivates us to change. But this never happens if we are not honest about our pain and struggles.

Time

Have you ever cooked something and took it out of the oven too quickly? In the same way that you can get a half-baked dinner, you can be a "half-baked person." If we do not give the process of grace and truth the needed time for us to change, then the change process cannot take place. God has invented time as a redemptive season for Him to change us. Quick growth plans do not give us the deep-seated change that endures. (Matt. 13:5-6)

One reason for this is that we have to go through different stages in our growth process. We cannot get to point c directly from point a. We must go through b. For an infant to become an wise adult, they must go through the stage of youth where they are made strong enough to resist evil. (1 John 2:12-14) We must get the early stages of growth completed before we are ready for more. As Paul told the Corinthians, "I gave you milk, not solid food, for you were not yet ready for it. Indeed, you are still not ready." (1 Cor. 3:2) We must go through whatever we need to go through in order to be prepared for more. (see Ex. 23:30; Deut. 7:22; Ecc. 3:1-11)

What this ultimately means is that in your process of growth, you are going to have to be involved in just that, a process. It will not happen overnight, and you have to give up the wish for the shortcut. But, the good thing is that over time, if you are involved in applying grace and truth, it will happen. The more that you can grow accustomed to taking the necessary time you need for things to happen, the more you will see them happen. As Paul said, "Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me" (Phil. 3:12). He was comfortable with "not being there yet," and at the same time continuing in the process.

Make sure that your design for growth included a process of grace and truth over time. Don't think a weekend retreat is going to do it. Instead, join a group that meets every week for a few years. Or get together with a counselor or supportive friend regularly for a few years. You overestimate how much you can do in a short time and underestimate how much you can do in a long time.

Getting It Together

For God's system to work, you have to have all three. Grace and time together, without truth, will make you comfortable in your stuckness. Truth and time together, without grace, will discourage and break you. Grace and truth together without time will give you a vision and then not have you reach the completion of that vision. They must go together.

There are many different methods, ways and plans that people use to implement God's recipe for growth. That is OK. You will have to find the method that fits you best, whether counseling, support groups, friendship, prayer partners, group therapy, or whatever. The method has more to do with your specific situation than it does any absolute truth. But whatever method you choose, make sure that you are getting the realities of God's grace, truth and time.

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