

Welcome to our six-week series called *Grow in Christian Character*. Over the next six weeks we will be looking at specific characteristics which our Lord grows within us through his Word. (You can see the Sunday themes listed in the study guide.) But as you look at the list, keep in mind that these are Christian *characteristics*, not *gifts*. In other words, there aren't a couple of Sunday's in there that you might as well skip because you don't have the gift of prayer or you are incapable of giving thanks. And they aren't like an all-you-can-eat buffet where you can load up on loving the lost while skipping out on doing your duty.

No, over these next weeks, we will look at characteristics which the Holy Spirit seeks to grow in *every* Christian. And by God's grace and through his gospel in Word and sacrament, he does just that. Of course, that doesn't mean that we always like it.

Perhaps you are familiar with the comic strip Calvin and Hobbs. Calvin is a rather inquisitive, sarcastic, lazy, precocious and bright boy of 6. Hobbs is his imaginary friend, a stuffed tiger. Together they experience many an adventure in the comic strip created by Bill Watterson. During his adventures, as you might imagine, Calvin learns, grows, and matures in many and various ways. But as you also may imagine, he doesn't always like it. ♦¹

And so here we are today, perhaps not always liking the way it happens, but recognizing that our heavenly Dad also wants to see *us* grow in character, Christian Character, so much so, that he blesses us not only with the *abilities* and *opportunities* to do so, he also fills us with the *desire* to grow in Christian character.

And this growth takes place in many and varied ways, but the special opportunity available over the next six weeks is the opportunity to join with fellow Christians in the new Growth Group ministry we are starting here at New Life. As you already know, study guides for today's message have been handed out. These are for use today as you take notes during the message. They are for use later in the week as a way to take the message with you to your homes and lives. And they are for use at the Growth Group get-together's for further discussion and growth. (And in case you are wondering, it isn't too late to sign up. There still is room. But if you can't participate in a specific Growth Group this semester, please prayerfully consider signing up for a group in the future.)

And I know, this may seem like a lot of fuss over nothing. It may seem like this is just one more thing to add to your already busy calendar. And it may seem like this Growth Group thing isn't for you. But understand something important here: spiritual growth doesn't come through doing the same old thing all of the time, going through the motions, or even passively sitting in the pew waiting to be zapped.

Paul put it to the Philippians this way. He wrote, ***Continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling.*** As Paul pointed out earlier in the same letter to the Philippians, he is writing to people already "united to Christ." So he isn't telling us to work in order *earn* our salvation. Rather, he is saying to us that, now that we have *received* the certainty of salvation from this sinful world through faith, yet because we continue to live in this sinful world, we need to continue to work at making the best use of the spiritual gifts and powers which the Holy Spirit has supplied us to grow in that faith, bring forth fruits of that faith, and remain steadfast in that faith until we are called to glory and the fulfillment of our

¹ <https://riteshjsr.wordpress.com/2011/10/08/recurring-motifs-in-calvin-and-hobbes-building-character/>

promised salvation. To put it simply, growth in Christian character is hard work: the work of the Spirit within us, and our work putting his gifts to use.

Just look at our characteristic for today: *love the lost like Christ*. Jesus' illustrative examples don't describe business as usual. The shepherd doesn't respond to the missing sheep by saying, "I'll take the rest of the sheep out as usual. Eventually the lost sheep will turn up." And the woman who loses the coin doesn't say, "I have nine more. The tenth coin will turn up at some point." No, the shepherd and the woman go to extraordinary measures to find the lost. Good things come through sacrifice, hard work, extra effort, and deliberate determination.

Luke 15 is known as the "lost and found" chapter. In it, Jesus tells three parables, two of which we are focusing on today: the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost son (perhaps better known as the prodigal son). You see, Jesus had been doing what he usually did - associating with sinners - and the religious leaders of the day were saying what they usually said - "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them." And so Jesus responded how he usually responded - speaking in parables to believing ears about the kingdom of God, carrying out his God-given mission: "The Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost."

Just look out our mission statement for a moment. ♦ Let's read it together:

We exist to carry out the will of God who has commanded us to proclaim the Good News of salvation through Jesus Christ to the entire world. To accomplish this we unite in worship and join together in Christian fellowship. We grow in God's grace through Bible Study. We witness to the world that Jesus Christ is everyone's Savior through his perfect life, sacrificial death, and triumphant resurrection. We desire to share the comforting confidence that everyone can be certain of eternal salvation through God's promise of forgiveness and peace in Jesus Christ.

By God's grace, it is our mission to grow in Christian character and then put those characteristics into practice. That's who we are. That's what we do. That's how we live each day.

And why? Not because we live in fear, or guilt, or doubt. No, *Christ's love compels us... He died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again. So from now on we regard no one - especially the lost - from a worldly point of view.* We don't care who it is. *If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!* After all, *God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them.* How can we do any different? No, *he has committed to us the message of reconciliation* in order to seek the lost like Christ. *We are therefore Christ's ambassadors... God ... making his appeal through us ...* and with beautiful results. Just look...

...A moderately rich shepherd cares so much for a single sheep even with 99 others in the field... a working-class woman is desperately motivated to find what amounts to about a day's wage even with nine others in hand... the God of all grace uses the likes of sinners - you and me - to restore a single soul with literally billions of others already resting in his presence for eternity... and the rejoicing is so great and reaches so far that even the angels in heaven sing for the joy of it... all over one lost. Hard work, maximum effort, new priorities, changed schedules, fresh approaches... it is all worth it.

So now the question remains redeemed, restored, forgiven child of God: In thanksgiving for all that he has done, what are you willing to change in your life in order to continue to grow in Christian character, in order to seek the lost like Christ? Amen.