

What do Ted Kaczynski, Bernie Madoff, and Albert Speer all have in common? They're all famous criminals and are all highly educated.

Ted Kaczynski (**picture**), is better known as the Unabomber. Between 1978 and 1995, Kaczynski engaged in a nationwide bombing campaign against people involved with modern technology. He planted or mailed numerous homemade bombs, ultimately killing three people and injuring 23 others. Ted Kaczynski is also a Harvard graduate with a Ph. D from the University of Michigan and for a short period taught at Berkley.

Bernie Madoff (**picture**), committed the greatest act of fraud in American history. He founded his own Wall Street firm in 1960 and was its chairman until his arrest on December 11, 2008. It's estimated he bilked his clients out of \$65 billion dollars. Yet, he's highly educated, a college graduate and even briefly attended law school.

Albert Speer (**picture**), a German architect who was, for a part of World War II, Minister of Armaments and War Production in Nazi Germany. He was Hitler's chief architect. Though claiming ignorance of the Holocaust, Speer was sentenced to 20 years in prison for his role in the Nazi regime, principally for his use of forced labor. Yet, he was highly educated and at one time, a professor at the Technical University of Berlin. So what!?!

Well, if you say something long enough and enough times, everyone begins to believe it. One of the myths of contemporary culture is that education is the great panacea, the cure-all for all of our nation's maladies. It's not. You can be uneducated and a vicious criminal. Or, you can be a highly educated vicious criminal. You also can be educated and very ignorant. A poll released last week discovered that 10% of college graduates think Judge Judy (**picture**) is on the Supreme Court. But a lost world is not the only one who has bought into myths of universal solutions. We do it in the Church as well.

Does God want us to grow? Do you believe that? Every Christian knows God wants us to grow. Spiritual growth is a vital part of the Christian life.

Yet, most believers, even many pastors have no idea how to cultivate spiritual growth. Sadly, most Christians have bought into the myth that spiritual knowledge is synonymous with spiritual maturity. Or, the more I know, the more I grow...it's just not true. It's a myth.

This morning we're continuing our series, **Jump Starting My Faith**. Today we want to talk about **Jump Starting My Spiritual Growth**. Please turn in your Bibles to 2 Peter 3:18 (p. 1020). God wants us to grow spiritually. I want to grow spiritually. Don't you want to grow spiritually?

Everybody loves babies. Imagine you're viewing a movie of a newborn child. You watch as the baby is delivered. It's an exciting time. You see the child nurtured and coddled. The film progresses and you see this baby become cuter and cuter each day. There are cute outfits, little bows, rattles, and toys. Then, there are scenes of the child as it begins to crawl. The baby stumbles a bit and can't quite get all four limbs working together, but soon enough after a little more viewing, you see this baby finally begin to crawl. This child seems to be developing normally. You watch as this child's life unfolds, and development and growth become more pronounced.

But then something goes wrong. The child stops developing. Though the baby is growing physically, he isn't developing mentally or emotionally. Soon it becomes evident

that as he develops into the stage where crawling is left behind, something isn't right. He still crawls when he should walk. He still mumbles as an infant when he should be developing language skills. He's stuck in the infant stage. It's a very sad situation.

Do you want to know something much sadder? A Christian who fails to mature properly in his/her walk with Christ. Who wants to be what the Apostle Paul talks about in 1 Corinthians 3:1-5, a big baby (**picture**)?

What is spiritual growth? How do we know if we're growing spiritually? First let's work through, and this is very important, let's work through what spiritual growth is not, because there are many myths and misunderstandings when it comes to spiritual growth. If you're taking notes.

1. Some warnings of what spiritual growth isn't. We've just entered the tax season. Just because someone is a CPA, doesn't mean they're a good one. The same is true with doctors and lawyers, or any other profession. But no doubt, the worst assumption in the Christian life is just because someone has been a Christian a long time, they're also a mature Christian. Chronological age is not the same as spiritual maturity. That's because...

a. Spiritual knowledge is not the same as spiritual maturity. You can know all the answers. You could have a seminary degree and still be in Kindergarten when it comes to spiritual maturity.

I ticked off a married couple some years back. They were marriage conference addicts. (Have you ever met someone like that?) They needed a 12 step to break their addiction to marriage conferences, yet they had a horrible marriage. They mentioned to me they were attending another marriage conference and I suggested, "Why don't you not go and just start doing it?" Going to Bible studies or even reading your Bible without applying it, just makes you a mentally fat Christian.

The theologians in Jerusalem knew Jesus was to be born in Bethlehem but they wouldn't get off their duffs and go to Bethlehem to check it out. Karl Marx (**picture**) was right, "*Theory without practice is sterile.*"

b. Spiritual activity is not the same as spiritual maturity. The Pharisees were doers. They were rule followers. They had so many rules that they had rules for rules. Though doers, they hated Jesus. They weren't regenerate.

You can read your Bible, pray every day, go to church, give big, serve in every facet of the church, but it doesn't mean you're spiritually mature. In fact, you can do all that without even knowing Jesus. Spiritual activity is to life what calisthenics are to a game. Once the game starts, basketball players don't get bonus points based on how many free throws they shot in practice.

c. Ecstatic spiritual experience is not the same as spiritual maturity. Our culture is emotionally driven. It's why many choose a church based on its music. It's about emotion. They're looking for a high. Something nearly oceanic. Yet, I don't think the Apostle Paul was feeling ecstatic when he was in a Roman prison cell. Stephen wasn't ecstatic about being stoned. Spiritual maturity is often unpleasant. Growth isn't always fun. Scripture never teaches asceticism as the path to spiritual maturity.

d. Spiritual maturity is not a way to earn favor with God. This one is the most important. Many Christians feel that unless they have their devotions every day or their prayer time, they're not close with God.

Yes, we should be in the Word and prayer – but that's for us, not God! You and I can never do anything to merit God's favor or forgiveness. It's all of grace. Spiritual disciplines are merely a means of growing toward the life God saved us for and wants us to have – the abundant Christian life.

2. You grow spiritually through... So how do we grow? How do we become spiritually mature? What is a mature Christian?

Chuck Swindoll (**picture**) writes, *"A grown-up Christian displays wisdom, self-discipline and commitment to a consistent walk with Christ. He or she is determined to obey God regardless of the cost, to seek regular nourishment from His word also, a mature Christian strives to reach out and care for others whether they be friend or foe. Such an individual willingly shoulders his or her responsibilities with a contagiously positive attitude. That's what a mature, grown-up Christian is."*

Think back for a moment. When did you become a Christian? Do you remember when it was? I was in Jr Hi. I've been a believer for about 35 years. I just want to say, even after decades, I still don't feel like I'm a mature Christian yet. In many ways, I feel like I'm still in my spiritual adolescence. While I'm seeking to grow as a Christian, I know I'm a long way from where I ought to be and more importantly, where God wants me to be spiritually. So I'm still in school spiritually speaking. I'm struggling and striving to grow as a Christian. You're probably in the same situation.

We need a healthy discontent with our spiritual status. Hopefully, you haven't succumbed to spiritual mediocrity with a, "I'm just going to kind of cruise along now. I'm going to go to heaven when I die. My ticket for heaven is punched. So all I need to do is just wait until I die and go to heaven."

We're missing out on the full life now Jesus has for us if that's our attitude. You must desire to grow as a Christian. If you don't have that desire, something is wrong. So how do we grow? How does God grow us?

a. God grows me through commitments. The Christian life begins with a commitment. You commit your life to Christ. That's what the Bible calls the new birth. It doesn't stop there. It just starts there. After you come to Christ, you start reading your Bible, praying, being with God's people, getting baptized, joining the church. We're going to deal with these more later. Just understand that spiritual growth is continually taking steps forward. It's like a baby. A baby as he matures begins to take steps of commitments.

It begins with one time commitments like salvation, being baptized, joining a church. Then you grow with daily commitments, being in the Word, praying, serving, being with God's people. Your spiritual growth level is really the sum of your commitments. As you add up all the commitments in your life, it helps you evaluate where you're at spiritually.

That's why it's vital that as we hear the Word of God taught or preached, as we read our Bibles, that it's not just a mental exercise. We must commit and take the next steps. It's not enough to just know. There must be steps of commitment and change.

b. God grows me through consistency. Some of you decided you're going to get in better shape this year. I'm one of them. This is what often happens. First couple of weeks of January, we're at the gym. We're working out. We're sweating. Then, February rolls around. Maybe you get off schedule staying up too late watching the Super Bowl and filling up on wings. You still get there but not as consistently. By March, you can't even find the gym...and they love you. You have a non-participating membership. They get the dough and you're not messing up their equipment. It's a great system!

There are probably more ads about gym memberships and food plans during January and February than there are all year. But we all know, what makes the difference – **consistency**. The same is true spiritually. Do you want to grow? You must be consistent. The commitment was good but it takes follow through. It requires consistency.

We'd think someone was nuts if they went to the gym a couple of times and then griped because they weren't skinny. It takes consistency. I have to be in the Word and praying regularly, consistently. I need to serve and be in worship consistently. It can't be hit and miss...or I just miss spiritually. Inconsistency will stunt your spiritual growth.

c. God grows me through challenge. If all I have is commitment and consistency, it eventually leads to complacency. You must stretch. You must push it. Here's why.

Say this year, you decide to get in shape, so you're going to run every day. You're going to be one of those nuts who run even when the wind chill is -30. So you start. The first day you're going to run a mile. You get about a half a mile. Your whole body feels like it went through a food processor. But the next day you get up, and you run a half mile again. The next week you're up to a mile. In a couple of months, you're hardly breaking a sweat when you run a mile. You've plateaued. And you know, if you're going to keep growing, you have to either increase the distance or the intensity or both. The same is true spiritually. God grows me through challenges.

That means if I'm consistently in the Word. I have to shake it up. I've been reading and studying my Bible for decades. About a year ago, I realized I was in a rut, so I shook it up and started a whole new way of doing it. It may be in your prayer life. Maybe for you it's service, you need to get involved in a new area of service. Maybe you need to join a new group. For most of us, it's giving – whether it's money or time. Money and time so easily become idolatrous. God wants us to stretch, to trust Him more, to sacrifice.

We love being comfortable. Our spiritual growth is so important to God, that He stretches us. Some of you got a new boss recently or a new work assignment, and it's driving you nuts. What you're missing here is that God is stretching you. Maybe your child is at a stage and they're really difficult...and you're whining. But God is stretching you. He's growing you.

3. You cannot “try” to grow spiritually but you can train for it. Have you ever told someone, maybe one of your kids, “Grow up!” The results were instantaneous. It worked didn't it? They immediately changed into a mature adult. No, you can't just grow up. Telling someone to “try” to grow up is foolish. But that's what most of us do spiritually. Then, we wonder why we're so frustrated.

Most of us, when we hear a message like this about growing up spiritually or about following Jesus, we think about *trying* harder. Have you ever tried to be more patient with a three-year-old? How did that work out for you? Usually, we end up exhausted and frustrated.

Spiritual growth is not a matter of trying harder. It's a matter of training wisely. That's what Paul tells his young protégé, Timothy. I want you to see this, so please turn to 1 Timothy 4:6-8 (p. 992). "*If you put these things before the brothers, you will be a good servant of Christ Jesus, being trained in the words of the faith and of the good doctrine that you have followed. Have nothing to do with irreverent, silly myths. Rather train yourself for godliness; for while bodily training is of some value, godliness is of value in every way, as it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come.*" Did you catch that? *Train yourself for godliness.*

It's the same thought behind Paul's counsel, "*Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable*" (1 Corinthians 9:25). Success is not in the *trying*, it's in the *training*. Every athlete knows that. Every believer needs to learn it. The key to spiritual transformation is not in trying harder but training. That's true in sports or music or construction or medicine. It's probably true in what you do for a living. It's true spiritually. Let me share some key areas a believer needs to train in which aid us in our spiritual growth.

Reading your Bible. Studies show we do better with a balanced breakfast before we begin our day. The same is true spiritually. Be in the Word before you start the day. Use the one year Bible. Find a program. If you've never done this before, choose a book, probably a New Testament one. Read a chapter a day. If you're not a morning person, do it at night. Be faithfully and consistently in God's Word.

Spend time in prayer. As Christians, we have a privilege unbelievers don't have. God listens to us. He hears our prayers. The only prayer God wants to hear from an unbeliever is a cry for salvation and repentance.

Where do you start? I like the acronym A.C.T.S. Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, Supplication.

Adoration: Tell God how much you appreciate Him. Express your love for Him. Praise His power and majesty.

Confession: Tell Him where you've sinned and fallen short. Be specific. Thank Him for the forgiveness you have in Christ. Ask for help and strength to turn away from future temptations.

Thanksgiving. We have so many reasons to be thankful. Thank God for His love, His faithfulness, His patience and a zillion other things. Express gratitude for what He's doing in your life. Thank Jesus for dying on the cross for you. Thank the Holy Spirit for indwelling you, and never leaving.

Supplication. Tell God what you need, no matter how small it seems to you. Do you really think any of your requests are big for your Heavenly Father? You should have lots of intercessory prayer here.

Share your faith. You and I've been forgiven, saved from eternal Hell and Christ is in our life every moment. How can I not tell others? Think of things we're excited about and share...and then we're not going to share our faith? Maybe you wonder, "How do I do that?" Just share how you came to Christ and what He's done in your life.

Find a place to serve. Jesus is our model. The night before He was betrayed, He washes His disciples' feet. God has not called us to be bosses but servants. Find a place to serve the Lord.

Be consistent in corporate worship. God is honored when His people worship Him...not just when they show up. Attendance is not worship. It's when we join our voices together, when we engage our hearts and minds when God's Word is being read or taught. That's worship.

Give generously. God is generous. We demonstrate we're His children, when we are generous too. But giving goes against our old nature. Most of us tend to give what we value less whether it's time or money. Generosity and true worship is shown when I give what I truly value. For me, it's my time. Writing a check is easy. Giving you an hour, for me – that's costly.

Commit to a small group. Are you a part of a small group Bible Study? A Sunday Morning Live class or one of our studies meeting during the week? A large percentage of our church comes every Sunday to "big church," yet aren't part of a SML or small group Bible study. One pastor calls them the *WAOs*. That stands for Worship Attendance Only. If that's you, you're missing out. It's easier to know people by being part of a smaller group. It's easier to study the Bible more in depth and ask questions. It helps us pray more intelligently for others because we know who they are. It enables us to better serve one another. We don't usually serve people we don't know.

Reading your Bible. Spend time in prayer. Share your faith. Find a place to serve. Be consistent in corporate worship. Give generously. Commit to a small group. Those are some areas every believer should *train* in which will help us grow spiritually.

4. You need some sanctified common sense when it comes to spiritual

training. We human beings love systems. We love standards by which we measure things and we like to do that spiritually. It's tempting to take these steps of training and codify them. We begin to focus on *rules* rather than a *relationship*. God isn't interested in us "keeping all the rules," He wants a relationship with us. The danger of legalism is it reduces the Christian life to a set of rules and regulations. It's a false belief that I can establish or improve my standing before God by my activities. So how can we exercise some sanctified common sense when it comes to spiritual training?

a. We must respect the freedom of the Spirit. Spiritual transformation can't be worked up humanly. It's a God thing. It's a work of God, not something we can engineer. We can't turn it on or off. It's not some formula.

The blessing of this is it protects us from pride. We can't take credit for it.

What we're talking about is the difference between a motor boat and a sail boat. We can run a motorboat all by ourselves. We're in control. The Spirit led life though is like a sailboat. We can hoist the sails and steer the rudder, but God sends the wind. Jesus said, "*The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit*" (John 3:8).

b. We must respect our unique temperament and gifts. Whatever your temperament is, it's not a hindrance to spiritual growth. God designed you. God gave it to you.

That means the particular combination of practices, relationships and experiences needed for growth are different for everyone. For example, the life of Abraham Lincoln is an amazing study in character formation. Lincoln was extremely disorganized and even had a file in his office labeled, *"If you can't find it anywhere else, try looking here."*

Each of us needs the freedom to discover who God wants us to be and how He wants us to grow. God isn't in the cookie cutter business. It's never the same for anyone.

c. We must respect our season of life. This can be very encouraging. It means our season of life is not a barrier to spiritual growth. I've heard young Moms confess that they're devotional life was so rushed because of the demands of small children...they felt so guilty because they weren't spending a lot of time in the Word or in prayer. But caring for children is a means of spiritual growth. It will drive you to prayer for help and energy. You learn to be patient and grateful for seemingly small blessings. It's a school of spiritual growth and transformation, just as much as spending long periods in prayer or in the Word.

Spurgeon (**picture**) said this to young Moms, *"You are as much serving God in looking after your own children, and training them up in God's fear, and minding the house, and making your household a church for God, as you would be if you had been called to lead an army to battle for the Lord of hosts."* **We must respect our season of life.**

d. We must respect the inevitability of mountains and valleys. One of the basic laws of life is rhythm. Mountains follow valleys; night follows day; winter follows summer. No one can stay on a spiritual mountaintop. Sometimes spending time with the Lord is like a celebration. Other times it's dry like C-rations.

When we forget this, we assume whatever phase we are in will last forever. When things are dry or I'm in the valley, I think I must have done something wrong. Does that mean when I'm on the mountaintop that I've done something right? Our spiritual routine will also change. We will have times of great spurts of growth. Others time we'll just plod but God is in all of it.

Conclusions: Life is full of choices. To grow spiritually we must make the right choices. When I was a kid growing up in Atlanta, if you went to pharmacy or place they served ice cream, you only had a few choices: chocolate, vanilla and strawberry. Then, we got a Baskin-Robbins! Today you walk into an ice cream store and you can't make up your mind because there are so many choices! When I was a kid there were only three channels on television: ABC, NBC, or CBS. Today it's amazing how many channels there are and they keep on adding! Life today has so many different options and choices.

Life is full of important choices. You're going to choose where you live; you'll choose if you're going to marry and who you'll marry. You'll choose some kind of career. These choices involve commitments.

Have you heard the story about the man who was performing a marriage ceremony? A preacher and the bride and groom were standing there and the preacher said to the groom, "Do you promise you'll take her for better and for worse, for richer or for poorer,

in sickness and in health?” The groom thought for a moment and said, “Yes. No. Yes. No. No. Yes.”

That’s not commitment. Choices involve commitment. To grow spiritually we must choose to be **committed**, to be **consistent**, to stretch and be **challenged**. But you must choose. It’s the only way to the fulfilling life God saved you for and designed you to have but first you must choose.

Maybe the first choice you need to make is to come to Christ, to accept Him as your personal Lord and Savior. To repent of your sin and turn to Him. How can you receive Jesus and the gift of eternal life? In Revelation 3:20, Jesus says, “*Behold, I stand at the door (talking about the door of your heart) and I’m knocking. If any person will hear my voice and open the door, I’ll come in to them.*” He says, “*I’ll fellowship with them and they’ll fellowship with me.*” As simple as I know how, that’s what it means to be a Christian.

Maybe the choice you need to make is to get serious about spiritual growth. If you’re a believer, if you’re part of God’s family and you’re not growing, there will be a continual ache in your soul. One of Satan’s lies is to tempt you to try to fill that ache with self-fulfillment...it never works.

This desire, this temptation for self-fulfillment is powerfully illustrated in the latest song by Taylor Swift (**picture**), *Out of the Woods*. The song – about Taylor’s troubled relationship with one of the members of One Direction – is a brilliantly crafted piece of pop music that’s been covered by multiple singers and bands. Her music video features a kaleidoscope of scenes (mountain, woods, snow, ocean), with Taylor enduring distress as she fights to free herself from the challenges in her surroundings.

“Out of the Woods” is about a relationship on the rocks. It’s about trying to work through issues until restoration takes place. But the end of the song has a twist. When Taylor emerges from her struggle, all scuffed up and muddy, she walks forward to a pristine, unharmed Taylor Swift-look-alike on the beach. As soon as she puts her hand on the identical woman’s shoulder, the song is over...and these words come on the screen: “*She lost him.*

But she found herself. And somehow that was everything.” But it’s not.

In a matter of minutes and in a few words, Taylor Swift’s music video provides a popular-level version of what philosophers and sociologists call “expressive individualism.” It’s the idea that the purpose of life is to find and express your individuality. You “find yourself” by fighting through all the constraints placed upon you by others. The goal is to emerge triumphant, fully aware of your own unique essence, so you can express yourself to the world. So the end of “Out of the Woods” makes sense to people today.

If the highest purpose of life is to discover yourself, then everything – including our relationships – must be reoriented to that view of self-discovery and self-exploration. The dissolution of the relationship is now a good thing if it prompts that crucial moment of self-discovery.

Why does this song by Taylor Swift resonate with people? Because, deep down, all human beings want to be totally known and totally loved. They’re looking for purpose and fulfillment. We’re taught a lie – the shortcut to being totally known and totally loved is to “know yourself” and “to love yourself.”

It doesn't work. The Bible says, there is a grander story of discovery that makes sense of all our trials and difficulties. This story is radically God-focused, not self-focused. It's a story about God finding and saving us, unworthy sinners. Not our attempts to find and save ourselves. It's discovering how God expresses Himself in grace to the world through the death of His Son, Jesus, not how we express the worth we think we have in ourselves.

What's more, Jesus said something that sounds very counter-intuitive to our ears today. The one who finds their life will lose it, but the one who loses their life – for His sake – will find it. The Gospel of Jesus Christ calls us out of the woods of sin and brokenness and rewrites those final lines from Taylor Swift's music video. We lose ourselves but we find Him. And that's everything.

But God does not just want us to find Him in salvation. That's not the final part of the abundant life that Christ died for and He saved us for. We find Him when we come to the end ourselves and choose to take the steps to really know Him, to surrender to Him and grow.

Do you want true meaning and fulfillment? Come to Jesus as your Savior. Let Him give you new life. Then, choose to grow. Take the steps... **commitment, consistency, challenge** – start today!