

"The God Who Makes Things Grow" 1 Corinthians 3:1-9

Introduction

- Very soon the trees and flowers are going to burst open. When Miriam and I were dating we took a day trip to a place called Longwood Gardens. Maybe some of you have been there. Absolutely spectacular. Tucked away in the Brandywine valley about 30 miles southwest of Philadelphia is the estate of Pierre du Pont, one of the premier botanical gardens in the world. Pierre du Pont, of the du Pont chemical company fame, built his first conservatory so he could have oranges in the winter. He failed. But his unsuccessful experiment has become something amazing. Longwood Gardens is a 1,050 acre paradise of gardens, woodlands and meadows. There are 20 outdoor gardens. There are 20 indoor gardens within 4 acres of heated greenhouses. It contains 11,000 different types of plants. Each October volunteers plant 100,000 bulbs. I can honestly say its one of the most beautiful places I've ever visited. There's even a massive pipe organ, 10,010 pipes to be exact, that plays music choreographed to these elaborate fountain displays that shoot and spout water in, obviously, the most incredible garden setting. It's just gorgeous.
- Did you know that our spiritual lives are like gardens? Christian growth, Christian maturity in the bible is frequently expressed in terms of organic, biological growth. Colossians 1:10 talks about growing the fruit of good works. 2 Peter 3:18 talks about growing in the grace and knowledge of Christ. Our spiritual lives are like gardens. Gardens require care and cultivation and attention. Left to themselves they become overrun with weeds. The same is true for our spiritual lives. The question I have for you this morning is how is your garden? What does your garden look like? Are things growing? Is one section growing while another struggles? Do you have a pest problem? What are you cultivating? Is your garden overrun with weeds? What's the pH of your soil? Is your garden thirsty? Are you using fertilizer? How about pruning?

Transition

One thing I want you to consider this morning is that...

Proposition

- **God expects us to grow spiritually**
- In the world of horticulture if something is not growing it's dying. Let me be right up front about something. If you have never received Christ as your Savior it's simply not possible to grow spiritually. Becoming a Christian means surrendering your entire self in allegiance to a new master.¹ If Christ has not yet come into your life, taken up shop, cleaned house and become Lord of the manor, you're not cultivating a garden, you're cultivating a compost heap. The bible says without Christ our Spirits inside of us are dead. You may be interested in spiritual things, you may even consider yourself a spiritual person, but it's impossible to cultivate the kind of spirituality God wants apart from Jesus Christ. You can't do it. Without Christ the spirit is dying, decomposing, dead. Only Christ can make us alive to God. That's why Romans 8:10 can say *if Christ is in you, your body is dead because of sin, yet your spirit*

¹ Blomberg, p. 83.

is alive because of righteousness. If you want to grow spiritually, you must do it with Christ and Christ alone. My old college writing professor said it like this. "The inner life of the individual who has not truly met God may well be like the unkept lot with its rank undergrowth that cries out to be cleared away and its random junk trees that serve no pleasing or constructive purpose. Saying yes to God is like engaging an expert landscape artist who will, if given a free hand, work to transform one's life into a thing of beauty in his sight."²

- The Christian life is not just a one time event, the reception of the seed, Christ crucified, into the soil of one's heart. It's a process. It's about growing. God expects us to grow spiritually. There is no such thing as spiritual dormancy. You're either growing or dying.
- Each spring Miriam and me, but especially Miriam, we have great expectations for our little plot of earth. One of the previous owners had a green thumb. Our first spring, we were shocked at the amazing diversity of plants and flowers in our yard. But you know what? When our garden isn't taken care of, you'd never know what's really there. Gardens that aren't cultivated don't remain gardens. They go wild. The passage we are going to look at this morning talks about growing spiritually. God expects us to grow spiritually. [Mother Goose](#) asks the question "Mary, Mary quite contrary how does your garden grow?" 1 Corinthians 3:1-9 answers the question as to how our spiritual lives grow. If you haven't yet opened your bibles please do so because I want you to notice...

Organizational Sentence

- **Two principles of good spiritual growth**

Transition

God expects us to grow spiritually. The first principle, from verses 1-4, is that good growth requires the right nutrient supply. And from verses 5-9, the second principle is that any growth at all depends on the master gardener. Let's look at verses 1-4. Follow along in your bibles. *Brothers, I could not address you as spiritual but as worldly--mere infants in Christ. I gave you milk, not solid food, for you were not yet ready for it. Indeed, you are still not ready. You are still worldly. For since there is jealousy and quarreling among you, are you not worldly? Are you not acting like mere men? For when one says, "I follow Paul," and another, "I follow Apollos," are you not mere men?* Again, two principles of good spiritual growth. The [first principle](#). **Good growth requires good nutrient supply.**

Main Points

- In order to grow a good garden a gardener needs good soil. Good growth requires good nutrient supply. The best soil is nutrient rich. Good soil feeds the plants and flowers rooted in it. Soil that lacks nitrogen, potassium, phosphorus, iron, calcium, sulfur, or magnesium will not grow things.³ The problem in the Corinthian church was their nutrient poor soil—spiritually speaking. Paul uses a different metaphor in verses 1-4. He uses the imagery of a nursing infant but the point is still the same. The issue in verses 1-4 is what the Corinthians were feeding on for their spiritual growth. They didn't want the food Paul gave them, the

² Rolland Hein, *Growing with My Garden*, p. 10.

³ "Soil Management," Microsoft® Encarta® 98 Encyclopedia. © 1993-1997 Microsoft Corporation. All rights reserved.

milk of the gospel, and they certainly weren't ready for the meat of the gospel, verse 2. Good growth requires good nutrient supply and the Corinthians weren't getting it. Failure to thrive.

- Paul calls them infantile, unspiritual, and worldly.⁴ In other words, even though the Spirit of God resided in them they were thinking and acting without any reliance on the Holy Spirit whatsoever. And the reason they were so unspiritual, so immature, so fleshly in their thoughts and actions was because of their faulty food source. Their choice of food wasn't producing the kind of spiritual growth God desired. Instead it was producing weeds in the form of division, jealousy, and quarreling as [verse 3](#) says. The results were ugly. By the time Paul writes his expectation is that they be farther along the path to maturity. They were supposed to be a mature garden by the time of his writing. Instead they were still in the stages of infancy, more like the sandlot weed factory than anything else.
- I can't overstate the irony of this passage strongly enough. The Corinthians thought of themselves as mature and spiritual and they would have been absolutely stunned to find themselves labeled by Paul as infants. If our lives are like spiritual gardens then Corinthians would have thought of themselves as Longwood Gardens. They looked at the rich expression of spiritual gifts in their church, and they prided themselves in their so-called wise teachers and they thought they had arrived spiritually. But Paul says in actuality they are the epitome of childishness. Where's the breakdown? The food source. **Good growth requires a good nutrient supply.**
- How do you know if you are a mature Christian? Actually that's not the right question. Here's the better question. What are you feeding on? Because if you're feeding on the right food you'll grow. The problem in the Corinthian church was that they mis-valued the message of Christ crucified. The Corinthians despised Paul's simple message of the cross as foolishness, bland unappealing breast milk compared to the teaching they were getting. In other words, as [David Garland](#) put it "they hankered after more exquisite charms of clever oratory to tickle their ears, which made the simplicity of the word of the cross seem bland and elementary."⁵ And so they abandoned the teaching of the gospel message to feed on synthetic substitutes that looked like solid food but in reality had no nutritional value whatsoever.⁶ The fruit of their lives was proof of their faulty diet. Worldly jealousy. Worldly quarreling. And you could add to that list bitter envy and selfish ambition and a million other thistles that do nothing but irritate and tear at the fabric of the body of Christ.
- Here's the deal. In order to grow and mature as a Christian, what you need more than anything else is to grow in your understanding of what it means for Christ to have been crucified and raised for you. The cross of Christ is both the milk that saves and solid food that matures. It is both your lifeline and your bread and butter. [Gordon Fee](#), I think, nails it right on the head. "Paul's concern is not that [the Corinthians] 'progress' into deeper teaching from the rudimentary, but that they abandon their present childish behavior altogether so that they may appreciate the milk for what it is, solid food."⁷ Good soil needs nitrogen, potassium, phosphorus, iron, calcium, sulfur, and magnesium. The Christian needs one thing only to mature, Christ crucified. You feed on Christ and you'll grow. Fertilize your garden with Christ crucified and you'll grow. If you share Paul's sentiment *I want to know Christ*

⁴ See Eugene Peterson's translation of these verses.

⁵ Garland, p. 108-9.

⁶ Fee, p. 125.

⁷ Fee, p. 125.

*and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death then you'll grow.*⁸ If in your prayer time and your devotional time you search the scriptures and yearn to know more of what it means for Christ to be crucified for you you'll grow. Christian maturity is not being able to distill and regurgitate technical theological language but its seeing and understanding how the gospel of Christ crucified and resurrected affects and applies to every aspect of life. If you constantly rely on Christ crucified as the staple of your diet the result is that you'll be able to distinguish good from evil, Hebrews 5:14. **Good growth requires a good nutrient supply.** Christ crucified is the only Miracle-Gro there is.

Transition

Our spiritual lives are like gardens. God expects us to grow. He wants us to grow. The first principle of good spiritual growth? Good growth requires good nutrient supply. The **second principle**, from **verses 5-9**. **Any growth at all depends on the master gardener.** Listen. *What, after all, is Apollos? And what is Paul? Only servants, through whom you came to believe--as the Lord has assigned to each his task. 6 I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow. 7 So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow. 8 The man who plants and the man who waters have one purpose, and each will be rewarded according to his own labor. 9 For we are God's fellow workers; you are God's field, God's building.*

- What's super clear from these verses is that spiritual growth is not dependent on a person whether that person is the pastor, the teacher, the worship leader, the radio personality, the Christian author. Whatever a person's gifting, whatever their personality and charisma, they are all just day laborers in the garden. Different servants may have different tasks as it relates to the garden; planting, watering, etc., but the success of the garden is entirely dependent upon God.⁹ The only one who can make the spiritual garden grow is God the master gardener. When you think about your ministry isn't that refreshing? Spiritual growth in others is not up to you. We're just cogs who faithfully serve. We love and serve because he first loved us and the spiritual growth—that's up to God.
- Let me ask you, do you find it contradictory to say God expects us to grow spiritually and in the same breath also say that any growth at all depends on God the master gardener? Is that a contradiction? That's not a contradiction. A contradiction would be that God expects us to grow and he expects us not to grow. That would be a contradiction. Instead, spiritual growth is a mystery. We play a role. That's the point of verses 1-4. We must choose the food source. Good food—good growth. Junk food—junk growth. But at the same time, once we choose Christ and continue to choose Christ, somehow, the results of spiritual growth are up to God. **Simon Weil** once wrote "The plant does not have any control or choice in the matter of its own growth. As for us, we are like plants that have the one choice of being in or out of the light."¹⁰ We must choose to be in the light of Christ. We must choose to eat Christ the bread of life. And somehow, if there's growth in our spiritual lives, that comes from God.
- You see, the problem in the Corinthian church was that they thought their spiritual growth was ultimately and finally dependent on human leaders and teachers. But Paul says both he

⁸ Philippians 3:10

⁹ Garland, p. 110.

¹⁰ Simone Weil

and Apollos are servants, slaves to the master gardener. Paul's the plow boy and Apollos is the water boy. They are interdependent and complementary. Are they both essential to the task of producing a garden? Yes. Do they both have the same goal, a garden? Yes. But what Paul stresses is God's ability to make use of their labor.¹¹ Only God gives the growth.

- I wish I could show you more clearly how strongly God is emphasized in these five verses. The flow of thought goes something like this. Look at your bible. [Verse 5](#). Apollos and Paul are servants but God assigned them the task. [Verse 6](#). Paul planted, Apollos watered but God gives the growth. [Verse 7](#). The planter and the irrigator are nothing but God who gives the growth is everything. [Verse 8](#). The planter and the irrigator are equal and ultimately God the master gardener will give them their individual reward for their toil.¹² And the conclusion in [verse 9](#) is triply emphatic. Literally it reads "God's we are co-workers; God's cultivation, God's construction you are."¹³ Who do you think is being emphasized? God. **Any growth at all depends on the master gardener.**
- What's particularly instructive for us is what God's growth looks like. How do you know good growth when you see it? Not all growth is good. Just think of a fast-growing cancerous mass. What does good spiritual growth look like? God's garden is planted in such a way that it brings attention, not to us, the garden, but to Him the gardener. [J.I. Packer](#) says it like this. "We grow up into Christ by growing down into lowliness."¹⁴ You see this in Paul's emphasis that both he and Apollos are servants, slaves of Christ. The most mature are those who serve. The greatest are the least. The way up is the way down. We grow by giving. And God grows others through our service. And so for us as plants in God's garden, we're more like tubers instead of showy flowers. We sink our taproots down deep drawing up the life giving sap of Christ. And we grow but it's a messy and dirty business. And sometimes it's kind of hard to see what's really happening under the surface. But if the food is good, the Master Gardener will do his work—guaranteed. And at the resurrection, at the harvest, there will be big honking fruit to show.

Conclusion

- The question I asked you at the beginning still stands. How is your garden this morning? Are you growing spiritually? Do you want to? Is your garden going for the wild look? Are the right plants in the garden growing? Which plants are you cultivating, the weeds or the tubers? Are you using fertilizer? What's the pH of the soil of your heart—receptive to the seed of God's Word or toxic? Some of you have neglected the garden of your heart for too long now. Some of you are ready to move from the compost pile to the garden.
- As we close this morning, I want you to close your eyes and listen to the words of this poem by [E.A. Robinson](#). And in Robinson's words I want you to hear the words of the Master Gardeners speaking to you right now. Listen.
 - There is a fenceless garden overgrown
With buds and blossoms
And all sorts of leaves;
And once, among the roses and the sheaves,

¹¹ Garland, p. 112.

¹² Garland, p. 111.

¹³ Garland, p. 111.

¹⁴ J. I. Packer in *Rediscovering Holiness*. Christianity Today, Vol. 38, no. 13.

The Gardener and I were there alone.
He led me to the plot where I had thrown
The fennel of my days on wasted ground,
And in that riot of sad weeds I found
The fruitage of a life that was my own.¹⁵

- What does The Gardener have to say about your garden? Just listen to him. Pray with me.

¹⁵ E.A. Robinson, *Collected Poems*, 86.