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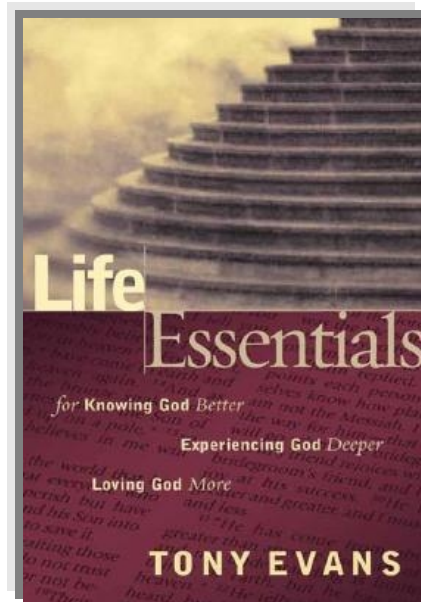
GIANTS, DWARFS, GRACE AND FAITH

[*"SIN, GRACE AND FAITH"—1 JOHN 1: 9; EPHESIANS 2: 8-9; HEBREWS 11: 1*]

WEEKLY SUNDAY SCHOOL LESSON

APRIL 29, 2007

FROM THE *MASTER WORKS* SERIES STUDY OF:



GIANTS, DWARFS, GRACE AND FAITH

[“SIN, GRACE AND FAITH”—1 JOHN 1: 9; EPHESIANS 2: 8-9; HEBREWS 11: 1]

He vies for the bedside position, hoping to be the first voice you hear. He covets your waking thoughts, those early, pillow-born emotions. He awakes you with words of worry, stirs you with thoughts of stress. If you dread the day before you begin your day, mark it down: your giant has been by your bed. He goes with you through the day. He says: “You ain’t got what it takes.” “You come from a long line of losers.” He’s your giant, your Goliath. Given half a chance, he’ll turn your day into his Valley of Elah, taunting, teasing, boasting, and echoing claims from one hillside to the other.

Goliaths still roam our world. Debt. Disaster. Dialysis. Danger. Deceit. Disease. Depression. Super-size challenges still swagger and strut, still pilfer sleep and embezzle peace and liposuction joy. But they can’t dominate you. You know how to deal with them. You face giants by facing God first. Otherwise, you become what Tony Evans’ talked about this week, a dwarf—a spiritual dwarf, that is. In order for us to grow and develop as believers the way God intended, there must be an unrestricted flow of the “spiritual growth hormone”, which is simply the grace of God in our lives. But what do we know about our adversary—the devil—that may stop or hinder us us?

Last Sunday we began a six-week Bible study about spiritual growth from Tony Evans’ book called LIFE ESSENTIALS and are basically trying to learn how we can grow spiritually and get more out of our lives—sort of more than just being “religious.” In our introductory session last week, we first looked at the importance of spiritual growth, relying on the principal scripture verse for the study from **2 Peter 3:18 (NASB)**: ***“¹⁸but **GROW** in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To Him be the glory, both now and to the day of eternity. Amen.”***

We then talked about the FOUNDATION of our spiritual growth being CONVERSION, meaning that without a life changing

experience and being born again, we can't even begin the journey of spiritual growth. Finally, we touched briefly at the **KEY** of our growth being our **IDENTITY**, and obviously that identity being with Jesus Christ. Today we'll be talking about hindrances to our spiritual growth, as well as the environment we function in, along with what we have to do as our part of this process and growth.

So, what did we learn this week is the **BLOCKER of our spiritual growth? [SIN]** Just like in my opening little story, our adversary strikes early and often into our thoughts. Have you experienced that recently, where the devil brings up past sins? The devil cannot stand that anyone is at peace and therefore he seeks to torment them with both the guilt and the power of sin. Why sin? The Devil uses our sin against us for evidence of making accusations against us. After all, one of the attributes of the Devil is his ability to accuse. In fact, the word Satan a.k.a. the Devil, means accuser.

We seem to have an entire generation of what Dr. Evans calls "*spiritual dwarfs*" that fail to reach their full spiritual potential and maximum maturity in Christ. Although there are many reasons for this, the bottom line problem and hindrance to our spiritual growth is SIN. It's sin that separates us from God. Our fellowship with God must be maintained as we have become a new creation. Remember our scripture last week from **2 Corinthians 5:17 (NIV)**? ***17Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!***

Now, just to be clear this morning, we're talking about the sin that contaminates the life of a believer and hinders communion with God and usefulness for Him. Those who are outside of Christ must deal with the sin that condemns a person to eternal separation from God. As believers, you and I have to deal with sin, but we also have a powerful ally in the *spiritual hormone* of God's grace. As God's grace flows to us and through us, it stimulates the growth of our new nature.

The apostle John addresses this new nature in **1 John 3:9 (NIV)**. Listen to what that verse says: *⁹No one who is born of God will continue to sin, because **God's seed** remains in him; he cannot go on sinning, because he has been born of God.* That's a strong statement that might throw you a little this morning because all of us sin every day in thought, word and deed. So how can John say we cannot sin when sin is a daily reality for us?

Don't misread the verse here. It is **"His seed,"** the new nature God placed in us, that cannot sin. It is impossible for anything that comes from God to be contaminated by sin in any way. Your new nature is without flaw, so your new nature cannot sin. But we still struggle with sin because our new nature is living in the old house of our sin-contaminated flesh. The former resident of that house, the old sinful nature, is gone. The Bible says, *"Our old self was crucified with [Christ]."* **Romans 6:6.**

You may recall the example we used in an earlier study about our battle with sin. Picture if you will a car with two people in it, both having driver's licenses. The former driver, being our old sinful nature, is no longer driving the car but is riding in the backseat, constantly giving advice and ready to drive. Our new self, with God's grace and power from the Holy Spirit, is in control of the car. Yet at anytime, our old sinful body may fall prey to the sinful nature and allow him to drive as we struggle in our battle with sin. That's why it's so important to grow in Christ. The more you grow spiritually, the more the Spirit dominates the flesh rather than the flesh defeating us.

God can't tolerate sin. We have to stay out of the dark, sinful ways of the world and walk in His light. Turn to **1 John 1:5-8 (NLT)** and follow along as I read about this. *⁵This is the message we heard from Jesus and now declare to you: God is light, and there is no darkness in him at all. ⁶So we are lying if we say we have fellowship with God but go on living in spiritual darkness; we are not practicing the truth. ⁷But if we are living in the light, as God is in the light, then we have fellowship with each other, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, cleanses us from all sin.*

⁸If we claim we have no sin, we are only fooling ourselves and not living in the truth.

Anyone been to a movie lately? What happens to your eyes when you're a little late for the movie and it's already started by the time you enter the dark theatre? How hard is it to see and find a seat at first? What about after, say, ten minutes, how's your eyesight then? Now, using the same analogy, what happens when we allow sin to remain in our life? [WE ADJUST TO IT UNTIL IT DOESN'T LOOK SO BAD.] If we allow sin to exist in our life, what happens to our spiritual growth? [WE DON'T GET GOD'S GRACE AND POWER]

So, what two choices do we have when we become aware of sin in our lives? [COVER OR CONFESS] And if we try to cover our sin up, what results? How about if we confess it? Turn to **1 John 1:9 (NASB)** and see what God tells us. *⁹If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.* I read a story this week that may help you identify with this concept of confessing and being restored in fellowship with God.

As an adult, Ed was in the Air Force. He had wanted to be a pilot. But, he had what we call coke bottle glasses where the lenses are like the bottom of a coke bottle. Now, keep that in mind and see if Ed's career in the Air Force makes sense. You see, Ed was an Air Traffic controller where people sit behind a radar screen and monitor flights. Even as a child, Ed had poor vision. One Christmas, Ed got a sling shot for a present. His parents thought that Ed would not be able to do any harm with that sling shot. Ed's parents figured that he was safe with a sling shot since he could not see all that well. His parents figured that he could not hit any thing due his poor vision. However, one day there was a stroke of luck as Ed aimed at his father's prize rooster. Usually, he missed whatever he aimed at. But, this time he aimed at the rooster and hit it in the head with a rock catapulted from the sling shot while it was standing on top of a wood pile.

It was the end of Ed's joy at that moment. Knowing that he had done wrong, he hid the dead rooster. He became a slave to guilt. Whenever there was a chore that needed to be done, his brothers (Ralph, Ben, Doug and Oscar) would always get out of their chores by blackmailing their brother Ed. Ed's father would give one of the brothers some chore to do and they would con Ed into doing it. They would retort, "Remember the rooster Ed!" Ed eagerly jumped on the opportunity to avoid being turned in by his brothers by agreeing to do their chores over and over. But, he no longer had joy because he was exhausted.

There was nothing that Ed could do to justify his killing Dad's prize rooster. Ed realized that there was nothing that he could do to make things the way that they were. But, Ed remembered his father's love. He knew that he had messed up. He was running himself ragged doing the chores of his brothers as he had become a slave to his own guilt. Finally, he got tired of trying to merit the feeling or peace that he had once had. Any peace that he had since he killed the rooster was artificial. He was exhausted from trying to earn righteousness which was not working. So he decided to confess.

When Ed confessed, to his surprise, he found that his father had forgiven him. In fact, Ed's father had known all along. He had been watching Ed from a window in the house. Ed's father said, "Ed, I saw you shoot my prize rooster with your sling shot from my window. I just wondered how long it was going to take you to trust me enough to come to me and tell me about it."

God is like that with us. He knows us better than we know ourselves. But, he wants us to always remember that he loves us. We must face up to our sin and confess the moment we are convicted by the Holy Spirit to do so—not a week, month or years later.

The next part of our study about our spiritual growth deals with the environment of spiritual growth. [Tony Evans tells of a man who was fishing one day when he noticed that the fisherman next](#)

to him threw the big fish he caught back into the water, while keeping the small ones. This went on all day until the first man couldn't hold his curiosity any longer. *"I don't understand,"* he asked the other fisherman. *"Why do you keep throwing the big fish back and keeping only the small ones?"* *"It's simple,"* the other man answered. *"My frying pan is too small to cook the big ones."*

A lot of Christians are like that fisherman. They are limited in their growth and enjoyment of what God has for them—not because God doesn't want to give them the *"big ones,"* but because their frying pans are too small. That is, their understanding of and response to God's grace are too limited and so their growth in grace is stunted. This is a crucial issue since the Bible commands us to grow in grace. Remember what **2 Peter 3:18** says? *¹⁸but **GROW** in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.*

We love to sing songs about God's grace, but growing in grace each day is a different story. Why is that? [IT'S OUTSIDE OF OUR NORMAL NATURE—WE'RE BORN IN SIN, NOT GRACE.] So, what is grace? [UNMERITED FAVOR] But, in your own words, what is it? It's simply God giving you what you don't deserve, could not earn and would never be able to repay—as opposed to JUSTICE which is getting what you deserve and MERCY which is not getting what you deserve.

God's grace has made us alive in Christ. Turn to **Ephesians 2:4-7 (NLT)**. Verse 4 begins with two of the most important, exciting, and life-changing words in the Bible. *⁴**But God**, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us,* *⁵Even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved),* *⁶and raised us up with Him, and seated us with Him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus,* *⁷so that in the ages to come He might show the surpassing riches of His grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.*

Do you understand that if you know Christ as your Savior, you are saved not because of your decision or anything else you did, but because God took the initiative to reach down and save you by grace? Salvation is God's work from beginning to end. So, the natural question here, then, is if we couldn't save ourselves, what makes us think we can grow in Christ on our own? We've already seen that our growth is as much by grace as is our salvation.

Can we ever run out of God's grace? Remember what Paul learned about God's grace? Turn to **2 Corinthians 12:9**. *⁹And He has said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness." Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me.*

When do we have trouble believing His grace is enough? What do we need to realize about God's grace when problems come? Listen to these words from **Ephesians 2:8-10** as you think about how we should respond to God's grace. *⁸For by **grace** you have been saved through **faith**; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; ⁹not as a result of works, so that no one may boast. ¹⁰For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them.* How should we respond to God's grace?

Look again at verse 8 of Ephesians 2 and tell me what is partnered or teamed up with grace? [**FAITH**] We all are familiar with and know the definition of faith from **Hebrews 11:1**, *¹Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.* But, what is faith in your own words? Faith is a firm conviction about something we cannot see, hear, feel, taste or touch, but which is nevertheless very real. Faith brings the invisible realm into spiritual view. It connects us with that which our sense cannot detect. What about **saving faith**? It is the conviction that God is true when He says we are sinners without any hope apart from Christ. And it is the confidence that God will keep His word when He says if we put our complete trust in Christ alone, He will forgive our sins and make us His children.

Why do you think Tony Evans calls FAITH the **action** of spiritual growth? [MECHANISM GOD HAS GIVEN US WHEREBY WE CAN TAP INTO THE SPIRITUAL REALM THAT IS ABOVE AND BEYOND THE WORLD OF OUR FIVE SENSES] Picture it this way: You can have, for example, the most high-performance car in the world, with every possible feature and convenience. But you will only enjoy the benefits of this wonderful car when you raise the garage door, get in the car, and take it out on the highway. Opening the garage door to access your high-performance care is the action of faith.

Without faith, what happens? Turn to **Hebrews 11:6 (NLT)** and follow along: *⁶And it is impossible to please God without faith. Anyone who wants to come to him must believe that God exists and that he rewards those who sincerely seek him.* Now, don't misunderstand. When we refer to the action of faith here, I don't mean the kind of Christian experience in which you have to do it all yourself. One of the main points in this study is the truth that the Christian life is not a matter of self-effort.

Why is faith that goes beyond sight essential? Listen to these words by Paul from **2 Corinthians 5:7**, *"We walk by faith, not by sight."* And Paul was even more specific about the contrast between faith and sight in **Romans 8:24-25 (NLT)**. *²⁴We were given this hope when we were saved. (If we already have something, we don't need to hope[a] for it. ²⁵But if we look forward to something we don't yet have, we must wait patiently and confidently.)*

Bottom-line, the reason many of us as Christians are not growing and seeing more of the life of Christ being expressed through us is that our faith does not reach beyond our sight. Remember, the Bible says it's IMPOSSIBLE to please God without faith. OK, since we know what faith is, how can we tell when we are growing in the grace and knowledge of Jesus Christ? We have a practical yardstick from God's Word.

Turn to **James 2:14-17 (NLT)** and follow along. *¹⁴What good is it, dear brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but don't*

show it by your actions? Can that kind of faith save anyone? ¹⁵Suppose you see a brother or sister who has no food or clothing, ¹⁶and you say, "Good-bye and have a good day; stay warm and eat well"—but then you don't give that person any food or clothing. What good does that do? ¹⁷So you see, faith by itself isn't enough. Unless it produces good deeds, it is dead and useless.

Now, James is not talking about faith in terms of how we are saved and get to heaven, but in terms of how we live here on earth. That's why he gives the illustration of the brother or sister in need who is turned away by a fellow believer empty-handed with this hollow blessing, *"Go in peace, be warmed and be filled."* And what does James say then in verse 17? If it has no works, faith by itself is dead.

So if someone comes to us who is hungry, and we sit the person down and have a Bible study, showing him all of God's promises to meet our needs, then pray and send him on his way still hungry, James says we have just wasted our time. A lot of Christians are wasting their time going to church because they hear the Word with their ears, but it doesn't reach their hands or feet. They are not doing anything about what they are hearing. True faith will produce works because it is an action. If you want to measure your faith, look at the response it is producing or failing to produce.

A farming community had gone a long time without rain and things were getting desperate. So the ministers of the community decided to call a prayer meeting, inviting the whole town to come and bring their religious symbols. When people came to the town square for the prayer meeting, they were carrying Bibles, crosses, crucifixes, and all manner of other religious items. They all cried out to God for rain, but nothing happened, so after some time they all went home. The next day, a young boy came to the town square by himself and prayed this simple prayer, "Dear God, we need rain. Show Your power and give us rain." As he was praying, the sky got dark, the thunder began to rumble, and

it started pouring rain. People in the town were glad for the rain, but they wondered what the little boy had done that they failed to do. After all, they had come to the square with all of their religious symbols to pray for rain. The difference, they found out, was that when the boy came to pray, HE BROUGHT AN UMBRELLA. He expected God to answer prayer, and he expressed his faith in his actions as well as words.

When you asked God for rain, take an umbrella. We reach for our umbrellas when the weather man says it's going to rain, even though these forecasts seem to be wrong about half the time. But we often fail to act on the Word of God, which is never wrong. If you want to soar to the heights God desires for you to soar, then you must trust Him and Him only. He can't fill you with Himself until you trust Him. And you aren't really trusting Him until you are willing to walk by faith, instead of just talk by faith. If your faith never reaches your feet, James says it's a dead faith.

Is there an area where you need to trust God right now? Do by faith what He asks you to do, and watch your spiritual life blossom and soar.

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APRIL 29, 2007