

The Risks Of Spiritual Growth

Steve Dewhirst

In Jesus' parable of the talents, the one-talent man hid his treasure in a hole in the ground. When called to account he said to his master, "*Lord, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you have not sown, and gathering where you have not scattered seed. And I was afraid, and went and hid your talent in the ground. Look, there you have what is yours*" (Mt. 25:24-25). The master furiously denounced the servant as "*wicked and lazy*" and said, "*You ought to have deposited my money with the bankers, and at my coming I would have received back my own with interest*" (vs. 26-27).

It's important to consider that probably the least effective way to grow money is by earning interest with bankers, but it's better than doing nothing at all! Whether the servant's fear was generated by his sloth, or vice versa, he proved to be worthless to his master.

All growth is pursued with risk. Farmers understand this principle best of all. Crops are planted, a yield is anticipated, but the entire process is subject to the vagaries of weather and nature. There are so many variables that are beyond the farmer's control, thereby adding risk to the venture.

There is a certain risk in spiritual growth, too. Scripture charges us to "*Grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ*" (2 Pet. 3:18). That is an apostolic directive, not a polite suggestion. It demands action on our part. It means we have to study God's word without fear or favor. It means we must learn to think for ourselves. It requires us to have a faith of our own, and the courage of personal conviction. And yet to do these things involves risk. Frankly, it's easier to bury our faith in a hole in the ground, just digging it up for examination occasionally, only to hide it away again for safe keeping. But such a stunt is antithetical to the spirit of Christ and Christianity. So what are some risks of spiritual growth?

First is the risk of personal frustration. Who has not wrangled with himself over some thorny question as he's struggling to understand a Bible principle more clearly? Not only is there the understanding of the principle itself, but then there's the impact of that concept upon other concepts. To a disciplined student of God's word, the wheels will never stop turning.

Very often we will reach the same conclusions we reached before, but from a better-informed perspective. Sometimes, though, our thoughts can be disconcerting as we re-think old presuppositions. We might have to come face to face with the fact that we've been wrong in our understanding about something - maybe for many years! At that point, there is the possibility of having to change our behavior or actions, our teaching, etc. There is the "pain" of personal application that the honest Bible student knows must take place. Faith is much easier when buried in the ground. But that profits us nothing. There will be no growth.

Second is the risk of opposition from brethren. Very often brethren object to the notion of "change" in any form, even if it's only an alteration in how a principle is explained. How often have we seen brethren differ, not over a Bible concept, but over the fact that one brother explains it in words different from the other?

And there will always be brethren who equate the notion of independent thinking with apostasy. The fear seems to be that if anyone "thinks outside the box" he will depart the faith. Such fear is irrational. It either fails to recognize the objective nature of God's revelation, or it is rooted in a credal view of

“truth” which must be defended against all attempts at close examination. Truth never fears examination. It can only become clearer in people’s minds with deeper examination. And that is precisely what God wants.

Third, there is the risk of intellectual arrogance. As we restudy and rethink old questions, we must fight the temptation of thinking we are the first to discover something “new.” It should be a red flag to us if we come to a conclusion to which very few if any others have arrived. While it’s true that the majority of people may hold an erroneous view or position on some matter, being a lone ranger ought to give us pause and cause us to study the issue more carefully.

If we “discover” something truly new, it isn’t God’s word. Our understanding of a question may be new, but the truth has been there all along, and others have understood it before us. We are not the first to see it or articulate it. And we must remember that if we have changed our thinking in one particular area, how many other things do we yet need to understand more perfectly? It behooves none of us to be arrogant when we are, in fact, finite creatures made from dirt.

Bible study is neither dull nor boring, except to him with no desire to grow. To the risk-taker, no thrill is any greater than that of contemplating and comprehending God’s truth. The desire for a greater understanding of truth should never become a pretext for arrogance or unbiblical innovations; but neither should calls for “safety and soundness” be a pretext for willful ignorance and spiritual laziness. Let’s take the risks necessary to grow spiritually, that we might find favor with our Master at last.