



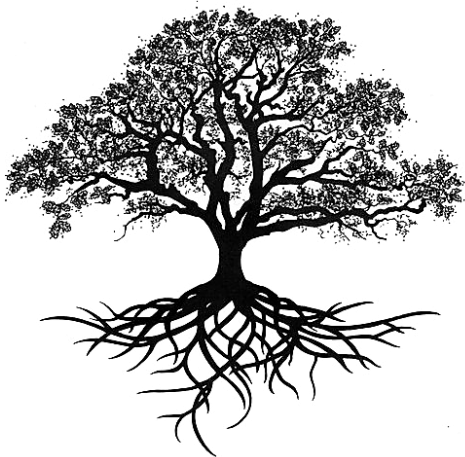
Part 2: Introduction

Cultivating the Good Soil: Growing Inward and Outward

Fertile Soil: Starting Your New Life with Jesus

For centuries, **trees** have been a helpful symbol to understand the spiritual life. The Bible also uses this image to represent our relationship with God:

- ❖ *Blessed is the one who does not walk in step with the wicked or stand in the way that sinners take or sit in the company of mockers, but whose delight is in the law of the Lord, and who meditates on his law day and night. That person is like a **tree** planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither— whatever they do prospers. (Psalm 1:1-3)*
- ❖ *But I am like an olive **tree** flourishing in the house of God; I trust in God's unfailing love for ever and ever. (Psalm 52:8)*
- ❖ *"But blessed is the one who trusts in the Lord, whose confidence is in him. They will be like a **tree** planted by the water that sends out its roots by the stream. It does not fear when heat comes; its leaves are always green. It has no worries in a year of drought and never fails to bear fruit." (Jeremiah 17:7-8)*

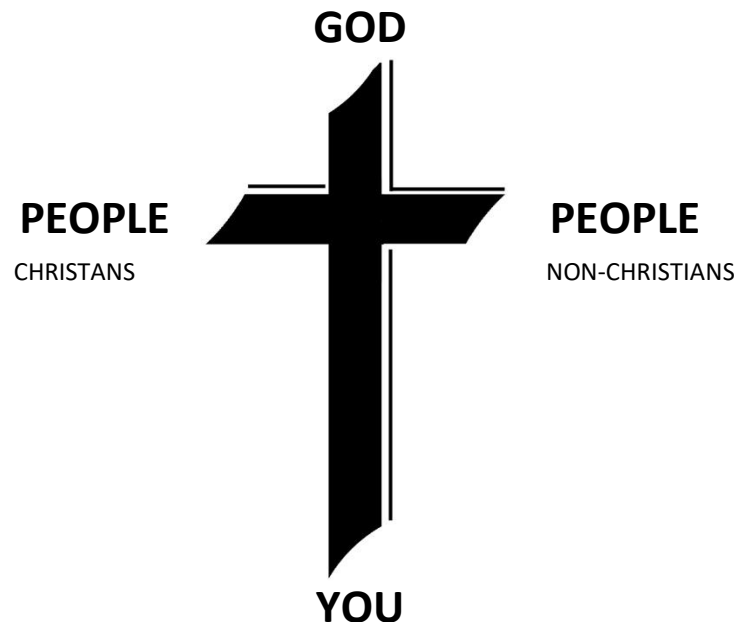


Consider a strong, healthy **tree**. It grows in several directions. A tree grows upward toward the sun, reaching its branches higher and higher, taking in the sun's light. Trees also grow down. What you do not see below the surface are the roots of the tree. Hidden and out of sight, they are branches growing underground. The roots stabilize the tree so that it doesn't fall over when storms blow. As the roots stretch deeper and wider, they seek out the nutrients and water from the soil, providing healthy growth. Trees also grow out. Its branches reach out wider, making room for more branches, leaves, and fruit, and providing us with shade to enjoy.

Like a tree, you need to grow in different directions. Your spiritual growth needs to develop in **inward and outward dimensions**.

The cross is the most important symbol of the Christian faith because Jesus gave His life for us on the cross. *“He himself bore our sins” in his body on the **cross**, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; “by his wounds you have been healed” (1 Peter 2:24).* Similar to a tree, the **cross** has a **vertical and horizontal** dimension—pointing up and down and reaching out.

As you consider your spiritual growth, let the image of a cross remind you of your vertical and horizontal growth—your **inner relationship with God** and your **outward relationship with people**.



In this second part of our studies, you will learn about some vital spiritual habits to continue your growth in Christ. **Inner practices**, such as learning from God’s word and learning how to pray that need to be a part of your daily life. They will help you to develop a closer relationship with Jesus. **Outer practices**, such as our ministry among other Christians and our mission to those outside the faith are important relational behaviors that need to be developed.

We will begin the second part of our studies by examining what Jesus said were the most important commandments. Before you begin, pray this simple prayer:



Almighty God, you who continually call your people to yourself, draw us by the power of your Holy Spirit into such a warm and binding relationship that we may faithfully follow you all the days of our lives. We pray in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.¹

¹ Job, Rueben A., Shawchuck, Norman. *A Guide to Prayer for Ministers and Other Servants*. Nashville, TN (1983): The Upper Room.