

"Growth in Grace"

by
James Yonge

"But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To Him be the glory both now and forever. Amen" (2 Peter 3:18).

It is a common observation that "as a man grows older he grows wiser." In fact, we should think it a reproach if he did not improve in knowledge or practical skill as he advanced in age. It is true, however, that the infirmities of old age may sometimes put a stop to this advancement; yet as a general rule it is to be expected that there should be a continual progress from the beginning to the end of life. Everyone should be moving step-by-step toward perfection in his chosen path.

Now, shall the children of this world "be so wise in their generation" and "the children of light" be less wise? In point of earthly knowledge and earthly attainments, shall we invariably proceed according to this rule yet think it not a disgrace if the like progress is not discernible in our spiritual condition? Shall we advance in experience and knowledge as a student, artist, mechanic, or businessman but stand still or even go backward in the Christian race? In pursuing the inferior and less important ends of life, shall we be ever approaching nearer and nearer toward excellence but care not how much we halt and linger when the great end of our existence is set before us?

Let us look back over our last twelve months of life and see whether our increase in Christian attainments have at all corresponded with our advance in life. And if it has not, then I fear we must reckon the past year as lost. I do not see of what advantage it has been if we are exactly where we were at its commencement. We surely have lived this last year in vain if our spiritual state is not at all improved.

Perhaps you question this last observation. "Have we not attended to our religious duties as carefully as we used to? Have we not prayed and read the Scriptures, heard sermons and observed the public ordinances of the church, given alms and done numerous acts of piety too many to remember in the course of all this time? And are not all these things to be numbered in our favor? Are they not all to be added to the previous sum of our good works so as to swell the amount of our claims upon the mercy of God?"

No, my brethren. Growing in grace is not something to be measured by such a scale. If it were, then everybody performing some religious duty would be growing. But the truth is quite the contrary. A man may continue performing for years with the greatest regularity but still remain in the very same state of grace without having advanced one step toward

Christian perfection, for by the word "grace" we mean the spiritual condition of a man, the Christian principles and affections that exist in his heart. It is these that must be improved and increased. Therefore our self-examination must not consist of a mere review of the history of our lives but must penetrate deeper, searching into the actual condition of our souls.

Searching the heart is difficult for all, and most unpleasant. Difficult, because it requires not only much close inspection, an exertion which few will make, but also much quiet meditation, for which few will allow themselves the leisure. And it is unpleasant on account of the humiliating discoveries to be expected. Consequently, indolent persons and those who aim at self-satisfaction are ready to put up with any substitute for this tedious and disagreeable process. They find it easier to take a hasty survey of a certain portion of time and thence conclude whether they have improved or not.

Consider a simple illustration. Suppose a drunkard congratulated himself on his advance toward sobriety because he indulged himself less frequently than in the year preceding, yet during this period he neither hated nor repented of his evil habit. May it not simply have been the lack of money that stopped him in his course? Now many people more respectable than he may make the same mistake. One checks his bank account and finds that he has given more in charity this year than in the former. Another has taken a step to attend the theater less often and lay aside the vanity of expensive clothes. Still another has taken up the Bible or some religious book to read, something which he can hardly remember doing since childhood. They all discover some great improvement and think they are making progress in grace.

But you must look further, you must dive deeper. You must trace the effects to their causes. You must follow a man's conduct back to the motives from which it proceeded. Was it natural tenderness, or perhaps even ostentation, that accounted for the increase in charitable donations? Could it have been merely ill health or a financial setback that caused a lack of desire for the theater and fancy dress? The Bible or religious books that were taken up, were they read with reluctance and aversion as a self-appointed task? I grant that all these things may be evidences of spiritual improvement; all that I assert is that one must examine himself to see whether his heart truly is more inclined to godliness. In spite of all the advancement in the externals of religion, even were it a thousand times greater, without advancement in the spiritual realm it would be nothing.

Let it be understood that I am speaking of those who profess to be Christians, those who have really set out upon a Christian course, those who have *begun* in grace. I want us all to seriously consider whether we are growing in grace, whether the Gospel is fixing its roots deeper into our hearts, whether the leaven of godly piety is spreading more and more, whether we can note a gradual increase of Christian sentiments and affections within us. I acknowledge that no one can come to perfection in a moment or even by a slow degree in this short life of infirmity and imperfection. Yet some too readily persuade themselves

that though they cannot arrive at Christian perfection in this life, they have attained as much of the Christian character as is required or desirable. They are as good a Christian as it is necessary to be, or perhaps possible to be.

Then let me ask, of what should this desirable life consist? Surely it must consist of all the Christian graces spoken of in the Gospel. The ingredients must be the love of God, faith in Christ, humility, charity, purity, resignation, heavenly affections, hope and other qualities and virtues. If even one of them is absent, the Christian character is not complete. So far we all agree. But is there any fixed measure for all these dispositions, or may they exist in different degrees of strength? What shall be taken for our standard? How much love of God ought we to have? How much faith, humility, charity? Where will you set your limits and say, "Thus far I will proceed and no farther?"

You can find no point at which to stop. At whatever stage you are, you may always go farther; and until it is impossible to advance, how can you be satisfied with the progress you have made? True grace is a restless and eager quality, panting after the distant goal of perfection. It will not be satisfied to halt anywhere short of it. It will not be checked in its course, bridled in, but will push on and exert all its vigor to the last, as if nothing were done while anything yet remained to be done. Thus it was with St. Paul. He had no thought that he had already obtained his goal or was already perfect. Hear his words: *"I do not count myself to have apprehended; but one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead, I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus."*

St. Paul is set forth as our example: *"Be followers of me as I am also of Christ."* He thought nothing of the proficiency he had made but put it all out of sight, ever straining onward after higher degrees of perfection. And all of us, we must confess, are very far behind Paul in spiritual attainments. Are we not therefore forced to acknowledge there can be no resting place at which to lie down and say, "Now I am as perfect a Christian as I have any occasion to be and may spare myself the trouble of striving for any greater excellence?"

How have we been persuaded to be thus satisfied with ourselves? Where did we learn that our measure of piety is the precise quantity that a man is required to have? Certainly we have not learned it from the Bible. There we read, *"You shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect."* *"So likewise you, when you have done all those things which you are commanded, say, 'We are unprofitable servants. We have done what was our duty to do.'" "We pray for you . . . that you may walk worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing Him, being fruitful in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God; strengthened with all might, according to His glorious power, for all patience and longsuffering with joy."*

Nothing is more plain than that the Christian character is not supposed to be any fixed and definite state but rather a continual progress toward perfection, a state of growth and increase never capable of being brought to such full completion in this life so that anyone

can take his ease by thinking he has done enough. So I must repeat, that if there has been no advancement in spiritual piety in the past year, then even though we should be precisely as we were at the beginning, I fear we have lost that year. And this is a matter worthy of most serious and anxious investigation, for what have we been doing all this time if we are not at all improved in godliness? What have we been doing if we find the very same deadness and coldness of heart as formerly? How have we spent our time if our faith is just as weak, if our prayers are just as languid and formal, if earthly affections have the same power over us, if we are just as liable to sudden emotions of anger, envy, pride, or any other evil passion, if we have not acquired fresh conviction of our sinfulness together with the deeper sense of our need of Christ to justify and the Holy Spirit to support and sanctify us? Have we not been quite slothful in spiritual matters while in earthly pursuits we have been making rapid progress?

It has pleased God to make the human soul capable of infinite improvement. Any faculty may be improved to any imaginable extent; and who can doubt that this will be made manifest in heaven when we shall mingle with the "spirits of just men made perfect?" It is impossible to conceive to what a height of rapture the love of God may be carried in a spiritual state, how intense may be the feelings of gratitude and devotion, how exalted every sentiment of piety will be, how vast the delight in everything pure, holy, and lovely, how deep the abhorrence of all that is evil and worthy of aversion. And though our present infirmities on earth shall keep us far from this attainment now, yet it is plain that there can be no reason why we should not be making continual approaches toward it.

There is no reason why we may not be ever increasing in the love of God, in charity toward our fellowmen. There is no reason for us not to advance in faith, purity, holiness, hatred of sin, and in general spirituality of mind. Why should we not daily be more and more refined from all that is evil and occupied in everything that is good? Anyone who aims at Christian excellence, and is at all diligent in the practice of self-examination, will not fail to discover such deficiencies in himself as to afford ample scope for improvement in every Christian virtue. Nay, the farther he advances the more conscious he is of his failings. Having obtained a deeper insight into his own heart, he bewails his own sinfulness and longs, strives, and prays for improvement. A Pharisee's blindness will give birth to the proud boast, "I am not as other men are." But it requires the eminent holiness and piety of a Paul to say, "I am less than the least of all saints; I am the chief of sinners."

The most eminent and established Christians are deeply sensible how few and little are their attainments. They are ever striving and struggling against great opposition. The flesh weighs them down, earth attracts them, a corrupt nature distresses them, an evil spirit incessantly attacks them, and infirmities and temptations of every kind beset them on every side. With all these enemies and hindrances, they know and feel the difficulty of growing in grace, of making any perceptible progress. And however anxious have been their desires, however earnest their prayers, however diligent their labors, however great the assistance from heaven, still they condemn themselves for their tardy pace, seeing

their goal of perfection still afar off. If any man entertains a better opinion of his progress, if he thinks he has already attained or is already perfect, he is very deficient in one Christian grace at least--for true *humility* would be ashamed of such a sentiment. Let the constant tenor of our prayers be, "Lord, increase my faith, increase my love for you, increase my charity to man, increase my affection for heavenly things, my devotion to your service, my gratitude for your mercies, my trust in your providence and grace, my resignation to your will, and carry on and perfect the work which you have begun in me."

My brethren, you have the same Gospel, the same faith, the same Lord, the same heaven in view that Paul, Stephen, Peter, James, John, and all the rest of those great and excellent men had. And though you may indulge no hope of equaling them, there is no reason that you should deliberately propose to be inferior to them. No, make it your goal to be as like them as possible. God will grant you the aid of the same spirit who made them what they were, and will so sanctify you in this life that you will be "numbered with his saints in glory everlasting!"

But I must go a step further than this. Aim at being like Christ, or you aim too low. He is the model proposed to believers: "*Grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.*" Paul did not mean by this a mere head knowledge or a knowledge of the history of Christ. Nor did he mean any enthusiastic notions sometimes attached to the expression "knowing Christ," which can neither be explained nor understood. He meant, in part at least, such a knowledge as would powerfully affect the heart and influence the conduct: "*Giving all diligence, add to your faith virtue, to virtue knowledge, to knowledge self-control, to self-control perseverance, to perseverance godliness, to godliness brotherly kindness, and to brotherly kindness love. For if these things are yours and abound, you will be neither barren nor unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.*" Any knowledge or pretense of knowledge that does not thus display itself is worth nothing.

How can you be more forcibly and convincingly taught to be always in a growing and improving state than by having Christ set before you as an example! Situations will come daily in which one may say, "This is not like Christ. Would He have felt this rising pride? Would He have been roused to such anger? Would He have harbored this unloving thought, shown such impatience, been so lukewarm and lazy in his Father's service? Would Christ have been so languid and weary in prayer? Would He have neglected so good an opportunity of promoting the glory of God and the salvation of man?"

When you can persuade yourselves that you are "come to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ," that you resemble Him in *all* points, then you may be satisfied that you have gone as far as is necessary and as far as the spirit of God can carry you. Then you may ask with some confidence, "Lord, what do I yet lack?" But if you truly aspire to grow in grace, you will have full employment for your whole life, no matter how diligent you may be to profit by every minute of the precious time God has granted you for that purpose.

In addition to growing in the knowledge of Christ as Lord, we must also grow in the knowledge of him as Savior. You may be inclined to ask, "How does this knowledge admit of degrees? How can it be greater or less? Let us consider what St. Paul said: "*For I determined not to know anything among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified.*" And again, "*Yet indeed I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in Him, not having my own righteousness, which is from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith.*"

Paul had solid reason for expressing himself in this way. Although he was fully assured that it was only through faith in Christ that he could hope to be saved, he could not be sufficiently thankful that his eyes had been opened to this truth, and he could not too highly value the knowledge that had been so mercifully imparted to him. It was this that so animated and encouraged him. Love was his motive to all holy and godly living. Love inspired him with comfort and confidence as to his own salvation and made him zealous in promoting the conversion of others. The love of Christ "constrained" him. He felt a force in that motive that he had never experienced from any other. He had been zealous before, serving God according to his power and knowledge. He had believed in the resurrection of the dead and sought to work out his salvation by strict obedience to the law of Moses. But it must have been with fear and trembling indeed when he thought that all his success depended on his own righteousness.

Therefore, when he knew that Christ died to redeem him from sin, and when this was brought home to him so forcefully that he was assured of his own safety, it was then that he was so overjoyed, filled with gratitude and actively possessed with the love of God and Christ that he devoted himself wholly to his Savior's cause, both by cultivating every Christian virtue in his own person and employing all his energy in the promotion of the Gospel. When we can feel no motive so strong as this knowledge of Christ crucified for us, then we will hate the sin which caused his death. We will love him who died for sin. And the more we grow in the knowledge of Christ as our Savior, the greater will be our aversion to everything offensive to him, and the more ardent will be our desire to please him in all holy conversation and godliness. May it please God to nourish this faith with the dew of his Holy Spirit so that it may increase more and more, and every Christian grace grow up with it!

Sermons XVII and XVIII from *Sermons (Second Series)* by James Yonge (Exeter: Printed by W. D. Pollard, 1832). **Note:** These sermons have been combined, condensed, and moderately rephrased for clarity.