

Christian DOCTRINES

for New Church Members

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LESSON SIX - CHRISTIAN GROWTH

When a person accepts CHRIST as his personal SAVIOUR, he is "**born again**" (John 3:3; II Corinthians 5:17; Galatians 6:15). Because a believer has just been born spiritually, he is described in the Bible as a "**newborn babe**" (I Peter 2:2). As a newborn baby he has a need to grow and mature. He needs to grow daily and progress to "meat" rather than continuing to be bottle-fed with "milk." By exercise he should be in the process of becoming a spiritual "man" in place of a baby (Hebrews 5:12-14). Surely all of God's people need and want to be mature in CHRIST.

I. THE NATURE OF CHRISTIAN GROWTH

Physically a baby grows in weight, in height, in strength, and in his ability. These are factors easily observed, and so we all understand what it means to grow physically. Spiritual growth cannot be seen as easily as this, and therefore it is not as easily understood. According to the Scriptures, how does a person grow spiritually?

In II Peter 3:18 we are commanded to "**grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.**" In this statement the nature of Christian growth is seen to be quite different from our "natural" way of growing. As "natural" individuals we seek to grow "in ourselves" - that is, to become stronger in our own bodies, our own minds and our own wills. We try to become more self-reliant and less dependent on other things and other people.

Christian growth is not like this at all. Christians are to grow more dependent on CHRIST. Instead of becoming strong in themselves, they are to see self as dead and crucified (Romans 6). They are to grow in grace and in CHRIST. Just as physical growth can be measured by checking one's height and weight, in the same way we can measure our spiritual growth by finding out how much grace we are receiving and how much CHRIST is doing in us.

Let's look at grace first. We must understand what grace is if we are to grow in it. Grace is "unmerited favor," or getting something you don't deserve or haven't worked for. Grace is God giving us things and doing things for us, not because of what we are or have done, but because of what He is - Love.

Now we can ask, what does it mean to "**grow (increase) in grace?**" It means that in more and more situations we will allow God to give to us or do for us according to His will, power and riches, and not according to what we deserve. It will mean that more and more of the time we will live each moment "waiting" on Him to act toward us and through us, rather than taking the initiative ourselves and acting or doing out of our own judgment and strength. It will mean enjoying the "riches" of God rather than the "rags" of our own making. A Christian should not be satisfied unless he is experiencing more miracles of God in his life each day. He will surely want to be "**growing in grace.**"

As we do this, we will grow in CHRIST and in our knowledge of Him for it is in or through Him that we experience God's grace. Growing in CHRIST requires us to grow in our faith in Him, so that we rely on and count on Him in more and more areas of life. Growing in CHRIST means that we commit more of our ways to Him. It means we rely less and less on our own understanding, strength and ability. As we do this we come to know Him better as we find He never fails and that He is completely sufficient to meet every need we have.

A truly mature Christian will be able to say, "**nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me**" (Galatians 2:20).

Perhaps this can all be summed up in the words of the Scriptures: (Colossians 2:6, 7 and 9, 10).

"As ye have therefore received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk ye in him: Rooted and built up in him, and stablished in the faith, as ye have been taught, abounding therein with thanksgiving . . . For in him dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily. And ye are complete in him, which is the head of all principality and power."

You have already received CHRIST as LORD and SAVIOUR by faith. You now are to walk or live by faith in Him. In this way you will be built up (made strong). In Him you are complete (lacking nothing).

II. THE WAY OF SPIRITUAL GROWTH

If we now understand the nature of Christian growth, we are ready to ask "How may I grow in grace and in CHRIST?" Colossians 2:6 offers us an answer to this question, "**As ye have therefore received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk ye in Him.**" We will grow as Christians as we follow the same steps which led us to receive CHRIST as SAVIOUR. Let us consider what steps we need to take in order to grow:

A. ACCEPTANCE OF OUR OWN SINFULNESS AND WEAKNESS

Before a person will accept CHRIST as SAVIOUR, GOD must convict and convince him that he is sinful, weak, and cannot help himself. This is true also of the Christian life. Paul discovered this truth. He says, "**For I know that in me, (that is, in my flesh), dwelleth no good thing**" (Romans 7:18).

Paul had tried to live the Christian life using his own strength and will. He found when he did

this that sin kept coming into his life. Finally he saw that this was not an occasional or accidental thing, but a principle which always affected his life. He wrote. "**For to will is present with me** (I want to do good); **but how to perform that which is good I find not**" (Romans 7:18b). Out of his experience of frustration and defeat he saw that in himself he could do nothing. Based on this truth, Paul found the answer to Christian maturity in CHRIST (Romans 7:25). In ourselves we still are sinners. We are saved sinners, but nevertheless our old nature is still present. This nature is a weak and sinful one. As long as we try to live the Christian life we will fail. Only CHRIST in us can live the Christian life. We must come to see this before we will be willing to live by faith in Him.

B. FAITH IN CHRIST

"**As ye have received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk ye in Him.**" When we trusted or had faith in JESUS, He was enabled or allowed to enter our lives as SAVIOUR. Our faith gave him freedom to save us by His power. The same kind of faith is needed in our present lives as Christians. In Galatians 2:20, Paul says, "**I am crucified with Christ: Nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me.**" Only CHRIST can live the Christian life in you, and CHRIST can only live His life in and through us as we live by faith in Him. After we see that we still have the old sinful nature we need to see that CHRIST is sufficient for our living the Christian life and trust Him. In all our ways we are to "**acknowledge Him**" and "**lean not unto our own understanding.**" (Proverbs 3:5-6). We should commit our way to the LORD that He might bring it to pass (Psalm 37:5).

C. YIELDING OUR MEMBERS TO GOD

As we trust CHRIST we thereby surrender our right to direct our lives. However we must do more; we must consciously yield (turn over) ourselves to God to obey Him in everything. We are commanded in Romans 12:1: "**I beseech you therefore brethren by the mercies of God that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God.**" We present our bodies - and then they are available for CHRIST to use. Yielding ourselves so CHRIST can use us is a necessary part of Christian maturity.

D. OBEDIENCE

Yielding means complete submission so we are willing to obey whatever the command of CHRIST may be. A person has not yielded himself to CHRIST if he is unwilling to follow simply and completely all CHRIST's commands to him.

III. MEANS OF SPIRITUAL GROWTH

God provides the new Christian with certain aids to help him grow in grace and in CHRIST. We need to use these fully in order to gain Christian maturity.

A. GROWTH THROUGH BIBLE STUDY

In I Peter 2:2, we are instructed, "**as newborn babes, desire the sincere milk of the word, that**

ye may grow thereby." Here the Word (Scriptures) is called "milk". In Hebrews 5:12, the deeper truths of GOD's Word are called "meat." In both verses we see that the Bible is our spiritual food. A Christian should make whatever sacrifice is necessary to read and/or hear the Word of God. Just as a new born baby must eat often in order not to become anemic and weak, so we must often open God's word in study and meditation. Bible study once a week may keep us "alive" spiritually, but the person who seeks God's Word at least once a day will become strong and "fat" spiritually.

If you do not have a system of Bible reading, begin with the Gospel of John, and continue reading until you come to Revelation. Then go, back and read Luke or Mark. After this you may want to go back to the Old Testament and read Genesis or one of the books of the prophets. The Christian will continue to need GOD's Word as long as he lives on this earth.

B. GROWTH THROUGH WORSHIP

Worship of GOD is man declaring GOD's goodness, power, love and mighty acts. It is man praising GOD for His gift of grace. We need to worship GOD privately, as families, and publicly.

Private worship can be practiced anytime, when we silently praise GOD in our hearts, or when we take time to privately read His word and pray. or when we go about our work singing hymns of praise to Him. Learn to "count your many blessings" and breathe prayers of praise to GOD as you go through each day.

If you are the head of a household, or if your family is a Christian family, sometime each day the family should have a time of worship together. Of course if you are a young person and your family is not sympathetic, this may not be possible. A family worship does not have to be difficult or complicated. A hymn, a chapter from the Bible, and prayers of praise and petition will aid all members to grow in the knowledge of CHRIST.

Private and family worship experiences are not substitutes for meeting with the whole church. Rather these daily worship experiences should prepare us to meet together with out fellow believers on Sundays and at the mid-week prayer-meeting. Every week a Christian needs to join his fellow believers in an assembly of praise. Hebrews 10:25 warns of the danger when we forget to join together for public worship.

C. GROWTH THROUGH SERVICE

Christian service must always begin with JESUS. In John 15:5 JESUS says, "**I am the vine, ye are the branches: He that abideth in me, and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit: for without me ye can do nothing.**" Until we are abiding (resting on, waiting for) in JESUS we will not be effective in our attempts to serve Him. He must be the Vine, or the Source of our desire to serve, and the Source of our service. God is working in us "**both to will** (that we might decide to do something) **and to do of His good pleasure**" (Philippians 2:13). JESUS declares that without Him we can do nothing at all.

On the other hand we must serve if we are abiding in JESUS and if we wish to grow. JESUS

says that if we abide in Him and He in us, we will "**bring forth fruit.**" Abiding means to give JESUS complete freedom to do anything He wishes to us and through us. If we refuse to allow Him to use us in service we will find that our joy in CHRIST is diminished and instead of growing we will become weak. The Christian receives freely and freely he must give.

The nature of service is illustrated in JESUS' statement in John 7:37-38: "**If any man thirst, let him come unto me, and drink. He that believeth on me,... out of his belly shall flow rivers of living water.**" JESUS is the Water of life which satisfies our need. We can come to Him and drink as much as we need. But as we drink we become a channel and the blessings we are receiving overflow to bless others in service. Out of the Christian flow rivers of living water.

When this is true of us, our very presence will be a blessing, and all of our acts will be service to GOD. There are, however, specific areas of service to which we should give special attention.

1. Prayer

Prayer was mentioned above in connection with worship, but prayer is also our first way to serve GOD. As we pray according to God's will (I John 5:14-15), or in JESUS' name (John 14:13), we are not trying to get something from GOD which He is reluctant to give. Rather we are opening our lives through prayer that GOD's power may pass through us to accomplish the work which is "according to His will." Prayer should begin (as should all things) with GOD, and we should respond to the prompting of the HOLY SPIRIT by praying for what GOD wants. Christians who cannot speak or sing should not feel useless - let them see GOD's work accomplished by means of their prayers. As they work for GOD in this way they will grow and mature through the exercise of prayer. The Bible says, "**The effectual prayer of a righteous man availeth much**" (James 5:17b).

2. Witnessing

In Luke 24:48 JESUS said to His disciples. "**Ye are witnesses of these things**" (His works). This is an obvious truth but easily overlooked. Only believers who have experienced His power to save can really witness to Him and to His power. Those who know Him are not instructed to become witnesses, but JESUS says "**Ye are witnesses.**" We are already witnesses to CHRIST. We may be silent witnesses, poor witnesses, ineffective witnesses, but because we know CHRIST, people look to us and we are His witnesses. We can't change this truth, but we can determine what kind of witnesses we are. This in turn will either aid our growth, or weaken us as Christians. It is the practice of telling men the truth about CHRIST which helps us grow. Are you serving GOD by telling men about CHRIST and His salvation?

3. Giving

A person who withholds his money from GOD will not be growing in grace and in CHRIST. This has been discussed in a previous chapters, but it is listed here that we might be reminded that our willingness to give does affect our growth.

4. Good Deeds

"For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them." (Ephesians.2:10) We are not saved by good works, but we are saved by grace through faith for good works. The Christian who wants to grow will need to be doing the things he was created to do.

CONCLUSION:

As you grow in grace and in CHRIST, you will need patience, for your goal will not be completely reached within this life time. Our aim is that **"we all come in the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ"** (Ephesians 4:13). Since our goal is to be a perfect man in CHRIST you should not be impatient, nor discouraged that you do not achieve this in a few months. On the other hand, you can expect to make progress. You can ask yourself if you are growing in your faith and in His grace. You can see if you are allowing CHRIST to live in and through you more completely every day. You can inquire if you are surrendering to CHRIST every part of your life when these are seen to be withheld from Him.

When you are failing to grow, you need to turn again to JESUS; confess your sinful and weak condition, and trust Him to work in you to accomplish His will. You will want again to yield all your self to Him to obey Him in everything. As you do so the joy of JESUS will fill you once again. And as you walk in Him by faith this joy will always be yours.

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