

THE POWER OF CHRIST

SERMONS BY TEXAS BAPTIST PASTORS

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SERMON EIGHT

CHRISTIAN GROWTH

By

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“But grow in grace” (II Peter 3:18a).

Life is a gift, while character is an achievement. From time immemorial Baptists have urged the great doctrine of salvation by grace. Nothing is taught more clearly in the Scriptures. For it is **“by grace have ye been saved, through faith; and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God: not of works, that no man should glory.”**

A man can no more buy salvation with anything he is, has, or does than the kidnapper and murderer of the Lindbergh baby could satisfy completely the child’s remarkable parents with the payment of a dime. Salvation is not for sale.

We Baptists, however, have failed to magnify the place and importance of works as a means of growth in the Christian life. To emphasize grace without works will result in ignoble, undeveloped, dwarfed Christian lives while to magnify works without grace would do violence to the plain teaching of God’s Word. Happy that Christian who having been saved by grace **“works out his own salvation with fear and trembling.”**

I. Life Must Precede Growth

The text is a plain command, **“but grow in grace.”**

All would agree, however, that life must precede growth. This is as true in the spiritual realm as in the physical. It is for this reason that the Bible insists on our becoming new creatures in Christ. Our Lord Himself stated plainly that except a man be born again he cannot even see the kingdom of heaven.

Salvation is a process, the first culminating stage of which is *regeneration*; the daily stage of which is *sanctification*; the final consummation being *glorification* in the presence of the Father.

The experiences in between the first culminating stage and the final consummation are the things about which I wish to speak. And yet I must say that such will be impossible unless life has been imparted and regeneration has become a definite experience of the individual. Christian growth is impossible unless there is a Christian, and there can be no Christian until the life of our Lord has been imparted freely to a penitent, trusting, expectant sinner.

II. The Way of Christian Growth

It is true, as stated above, that life is a gift while character is an achievement.

The great apostle exclaimed: **“I am what I am by the grace of God,”** but one must remember that he yearned for that grace and appropriated it freely. It was through sacrificial living and daring exploits that he learned **“my grace is sufficient for thee.”**

Christian growth is the result of two primary factors: *nourishment and growth.*

Every child of God has the blessed opportunity of feeding his soul upon **“the sincere milk of the Word.”** In case he fails to do so he robs himself of that which God intended him to have, and as a result may be anemic; having no adequate vision, no robust hope, no glowing faith.

The Christian will do well to add to the devotional study of God’s Word a regular wholesome fellowship with his fellow Christians. How beautiful is the suggestion of that tender passage which says, **“they help every one his neighbour; and every one saith to his brother, be of good courage.”**

What strength comes to the needy heart through worship with those of like mind, listening to the testimony of the sustaining grace of God given to fellow travelers who have met severe temptations triumphantly, or borne heavy burdens graciously, or walked through the valley of the shadow of death conscious of His presence.

The first verses of Second Peter indicate that the apostle was writing to those who had become **“partakers of the divine nature, having escaped from the corruption which is in the world through lust.”**

Reading on, the fifth verse says: **“And beside this, giving all diligence, add to your faith virtue.”** The apostle is teaching clearly that Christians have something to do if they are to grow in grace. They must add to the faith by which they laid hold on the promises of God, a definite program of personal achievement in His name.

The most desirable Christian virtues—knowledge, self-control, patience, Godliness, brotherly kindness and love, will not be possessed by those who fail to give all diligence to achieve them.

The apostle Paul urged young Timothy, **“exercise thyself rather unto Godliness.”**

Any Christian can grow in grace who will pay the price of that growth.

To remain a babe in Christ he has only to do nothing. Spiritual muscles can be flabby just as surely as physical muscles.

A man does not become a physical giant without lifting heavy loads, carrying great burdens, and at times straining every muscle in his body. Without exception, great Christians are those who “have expected great things from God and have undertaken great things for God.”

It was said that Abraham did not stumble at the promises of God, but Abraham was a man who by faith “**went out,**” who by faith “**offered up,**” who by faith unselfishly “**divided,**” who by faith paid his tithes. Abraham was a doer. He exercised himself unto Godliness. We are not unmindful of the fact that we must be, before we can do, and yet we must remember that what we do is the mark and measure of what we are.

The Christian who accepts the grace of God and sits down for forty years is deceiving himself. Others will teach Sunday school classes, give of their money, and assume the various responsibilities necessary to the promotion of the Lord’s work, but the idle Christian is personally the greatest loser. Some day with dwarfed life, shriveled soul and empty hands he will stand before Him who gave His all. He will have missed the heart throbs of time, and will be incapable of enjoying to the fullest as many others do the glories of eternity.

III. The Lord Rebukes Those Who Do Not Grow

Read the fifth chapter of Hebrews, and you will find that the writer reaches a climax when he refers to Jesus Christ, our High Priest after the order of Melchizedec. Continuing, in verse eleven, he says: “**Of whom we have many things to say, and hard to be uttered, seeing ye are dull of hearing. For when for the time ye ought to be teachers, ye have need that one teach you again which be the first principles of the oracles of God; and are become such as have need of milk, and not of strong meat. For every one that useth milk is unskilful in the word of righteousness: for he is a babe. But strong meat belongeth to them that are of full age, even those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil.**”

The writer has a great message that would enter into the deeper things of the Christian life, but he cannot deliver it to these people, because of their lack of growth. They had been Christians long enough that they themselves should have been teachers, but unfortunately it was necessary to go over again the A-B-C’s of the gospel.

A young baby is a joy; an old one is a tragedy.

My wife was in a store one day and saw a mother holding a three-year-old child in her arms and standing by a toy counter. The mother showed her little curly-haired girl toy after toy, but the child seemed indifferent. An expression of anxiety was on the mother’s face as she took a noise-making toy and rattled it vigorously before the child. When this brought no response, the mother burst into tears. Mrs. Williams went to her, and soon the mother’s story was poured out to the sympathetic stranger. Her baby was not well, it hadn’t developed normally. She had just returned from another of her frequent visits to the doctor, and the kindly man had told her he thought maybe the child was some improved. “But she isn’t,” cried the grief-stricken mother.

It must grieve the heart of God for His own to remain as babes year after year, when they might grow up “**unto a perfect (full grown) man, unto the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.**”

What is more pathetic than to see an old man straining to read the simplest writings when he might have been able, had he matured normally, to enter into fellowship with Shakespeare, Tennyson and Browning. Better still, he might have been able to discern the great messages of the Word of God, and with surging soul exclaim: “O God, I am thinking Thy thoughts after Thee.”

Surface water may be lukewarm or even stagnant, while that which is drawn from the deepest well is cool and satisfying. If I am to fellowship with God, I must think with Him, I must see with Him, I must yearn with Him, I must love with Him, I must give with Him. It is said that virtue is its own reward. Christian growth brings its reward in the consciousness that others have been blessed and that the more mature Christian has reached that high plane where he can enter into intimate fellowship with God.

Dr. John Howard Williams was born in Dallas, Tex., July 3, 1894. Education, Baylor U., Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary (A.B., Th.M. and D.D.). Ordained, Aug., 1914. Pastorates: Cole Ave., Dallas Tex., 1914-18; Venus, Tex., 1920-21; Middletown, Ky., 1921-23; Sulphur Springs, Tex., 1923-26; Corsicana, Tex., 1926-31. Executive Secretary for Tex. Baptists, 1931-36. Pastor, Amarillo, Tex., July 1, 1936 to date.

First Baptist Church, Amarillo, has 2,728 members. Since July 1, 1936, under Dr. Williams’ ministry, there have been 547 additions. Total contributions have been \$80,400. Their record S. S. attendance is 1,801. Total value of their church property is \$610,000 (All statistics as of Dec. 15, 1937).

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