

2 Peter No. 15, “Grow in Grace”

2 Peter 3:14-18

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Tonight, we conclude our sermons on 2 Peter. We spoke last time from this same concluding paragraph about Peter’s comments on the writings of the Apostle Paul, viz. that Paul’s writings belonged to Holy Scripture and that they contained some difficult passages that had invited willful misunderstanding on the part of the enemies of the gospel. Almost certainly those remarks were at least in part directed at the false teachers whose influence Peter had written this letter to counteract. After all, they were denying the Second Coming of Christ and because they no longer feared the judgment of God they were encouraging the saints to enjoy a worldly and licentious way of life. Certainly, Paul taught no such thing. Purity, sobriety, moral seriousness cannot endure in a context in which all the reasons to make the sacrifices necessary to live such a life have been rejected. The Christian life can only be faithfully lived by those who understand *why* it must be lived. In the Bible theology is the lifeblood of ethics, our faith – what we know of God and salvation, of the past and the future – is the reason for our obedience and service.

This final paragraph reprises the whole of the letter. Its final exhortation – “grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” – is, in brief, what Peter began with in the opening verses of the letter.

“For this very reason, make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue, virtue with knowledge, and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with steadfastness, and steadfastness with godliness, and godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love.”

As we said in one of the early sermons, in too many cases it might be fairly said that the Christian life is “an initial spasm followed by chronic inertia.” [In Green, 76] But this is not the profile of a Christian in the Bible! This idea that Christians should “grow,” that is, that they should become better Christians through the course of their lives, that they should live a godlier life when they are older than they did when they were younger, is, of course, a commonplace of the Bible’s teaching. Think, for example, of Paul in Ephesians 4:15:

“Rather, speaking the truth in love, *we are to grow up* in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.”

Or Paul’s similar statement in Col. 1:10 in which Paul says that he prays for the Colossian believers precisely that *they may increase* in the knowledge of the Lord. When sinners are made *new creatures in Christ*, principles and powers are implanted as seeds in their hearts that then need to be nourished, cultivated, weeded, and protected until roots are sunk deep and new life begins to bear increasing amounts of fruit. Indeed, much of the Bible’s instruction in the Christian life is designed to create the inner and outer environments in which a Christian will grow. All that the Bible says about our dependence upon one another, our use of spiritual gifts,

our life of prayer, our study of the Word of God, our practice of the faith, even about the suffering that God has appointed for us, even the moral failures that darken our lives, I say all of this is directed toward this one goal: ever-deepening godliness and goodness.

John Newton, the author of *Amazing Grace*, the former slave trader turned Christian minister and one of the leaders of the second generation of the Great Awakening in 18th century England, was a much sought-after correspondent. And no wonder. His letters are masterpieces of Christian wisdom and practical advice. Many of them were later collected and published under the title *Cardiphonia*, the utterance of the heart. In one of them Newton reflected on the Lord's statement in Mark 4:28 concerning the progress of life in the kingdom of God:

“The earth produces by itself, first the blade, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear.”

The kingdom of God is like that, Jesus said. The seed is planted and then it grows but the full fruit is not harvested until the end of the growing season. Jesus was talking about the kingdom as a whole, but the principle applies to each member of that kingdom as well. In that letter – I distinctly remember the impression it made on me when I first read it years ago – Newton contrasts the new believer with the mature Christian. There is a fervor, a zeal, an enthusiasm that is characteristic of new spiritual life and that is wonderful. Indeed, the older believer may well look back on his early life as a Christian and miss that sense of excitement and new discovery. But the new Christian is also less stable, often unwise, and usually proud in ways he or she is not yet able to detect. The older believer is humbler – he knows his own failures from long experience –, more cautious, and wiser. His feelings may not be as warm, but his judgment is more solid. He knows more; he also knows what he does not know; that is often a weakness of young believers who are cocksure because they have not yet been disappointed, knocked around the way every Christian will and must be. The mature believer is slower to judge others, less of a mind to think he knows what God will do and give in answer to our prayers. He is more eager to get to heaven because he has suffered so much disappointment in his life in this world. In other words, there is a great difference between the young believer and the older, practiced, mature Christian. *Or, at least there ought to be.*

But, the fact is, as the Bible itself makes painfully clear, it is not always the case that Christians grow in the grace and knowledge of the Lord and so come to a mature godliness, a deeper devotion, a more beautiful humility, and a more ardent love for God and man by the time their pilgrimage is over. Those of us who have been Christians for any length of time know this believer or that who seems to be less of a Christian in his older age than he was when younger and newer to the faith. I do. More concerning we may often wonder if we are ourselves better Christians than we used to be. The Bible acknowledges this reality in the lives of people who it tells us were true believers. Think of David who certainly finished his life at a lower level of spiritual accomplishment than had been true of him when a younger man. His son Solomon even more so. Or think of Isaac or Gideon or Asa or Hezekiah. These men started well; finished less well and in some cases finished poorly. They were believers, but it isn't obvious that they were all their believing lives growing in the grace and knowledge of the Lord.

And in the New Testament we have the same. Think of the man of whom Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians 3: he does his work poorly and so his work is burned up. He himself is saved, but as

through fire. There are Samsons in the new epoch as there were in the ancient epoch! I know some Christians who seem to have learned nothing over the course of their many years of walking with God. They continue to make the same obvious mistakes of judgment they made when they were young. A lot of needless contention in the church is caused by people like that; people who never learn how to manage differences of opinion. So, let's be sure that you and I do not miss the obvious. Peter finished his letter exhorting us to grow in the grace and knowledge of the Lord *because it is altogether possible that even a real Christian won't or won't very much!* We must not be among them.

I read a lot of biographies. I find them fascinating, at least most of them. I started reading Steve Job's biography – Jobs, you remember, was the co-founder of *Apple* – but I lost interest half-way through. His life taught him nothing and it became clear rather quickly that I was going to learn nothing from his life either. But I am now reading Andrew Roberts magnificent biography of Winston Churchill, all 1000 large pages of it. In just two weeks I've reached page 800 because I find myself carried along by the narrative. Churchill was, as you know, one of the titans of modern history. His was a fascinating life and, of course, there is much to admire in that life. No wonder hundreds of Churchill biographies, great and small, have been written. I have read a number of them myself. One of the fascinating features of Churchill's life story is that so much of his influence, especially his leadership of Britain during World War II, was the result of his having set out to master certain skills. By application and dedication, he became a master of the English language. Those great wartime speeches did not trip off his tongue without thought or plan. He had learned what made for an effective English sentence; he had mastered the art of persuasive oratory. In this way he was a more effective speaker later in his life than he had been as a young man. He had read prodigiously, especially the masters of the English language; he had studied their prose and poetry, he had learned what made their writing beautiful and powerful. He committed immense amounts of poetry to memory.

His great wartime speeches were the practiced art of a literary craftsman. No one could have produced such powerful oratory off the top of his head. Churchill made himself the orator he was, and it took immense amounts of time and effort to do so. The American journalist Edward R. Murrow said of Churchill, "He mobilized the English language and sent it into battle." He learned how to choose the right word – often making a point of using only words of one syllable – how to string words together, often four adjectives or nouns in a row – most famously "blood, toil, tears, and sweat" – when to use old words instead of new words, and so on. He grew as a writer and a speaker until he was able to harvest the ripe fruit of his learning at a most critical moment in the history of the world. He won the Nobel Prize for literature for the same reason: he labored at his craft. As Ernest Hemingway said of writing fine literature: "It's none of their business – he's talking about the readers - that you have to learn how to write. Let them think you were born that way."

Well, you see, the same is true of the Christian life. You and I are to become masters of this craft of living the Christian life. The young eager Christian is full of zeal and ardor, but there is much he does not know; much he cannot do as well as he might do it. He does not yet, she does not yet know what he or she does not know. He is often an easy mark for a false teacher, as some of these Christians had been to whom Peter wrote his letter. Their teaching sounded Christian, if somewhat different from what they had received from Peter and Paul. It was attractive at a

certain level. It made the Christian life much easier. They needed wisdom to discern truth from error and it takes time to become wise. They needed to be able to separate the wheat from the chaff and that takes experience. They needed to detect the false note in teaching and that takes learning.

I saw on the television the other night an ad – this was not on so-called Christian TV – sponsored by Peter Popoff, a faith-healer who had been exposed as a charlatan on network television more than 20 years ago. Well, he’s back. And he is offering you *free* a small packet of “miracle spring water.” And, while I at first doubted that this miracle water would bring me God’s blessing as Mr. Popoff promised – the ad even cited a Bible verse – there were several people who testified that soon after drinking the water they had received large checks in the mail. Surely no one would lie about that! Strange to say some real Christians were once taken in by this man. There was enough of Christ and the Bible in his radio teaching to dupe the gullible. But we would rightly have little sympathy for a man or woman who had been a Christian for any length of time and still got suckered with a pitch as ridiculous and as blasphemous as this. Christians should grow up faster than that and Christians with a Bible in their hands should soon be able to spot the difference between the truth and the substitutes the Devil offers in its place.

But there is something else about Churchill that I have noticed in this reading of his life. In respect to those features of his character *by which we judge the quality of the character of a man* he was much the same person as an older man as he had been as a young adult. To be sure, some of those features were positive: his courage, his industry, his sense of humor, and his loyalty to his family and friends. But the same must be said of those features much less attractive: his cocksure self-confidence, his towering egoism, and his hunger and thirst for fame and power. He had a solid marriage and he adored his wife, but he was a hard man to be married to. He and Clementine spent large parts of their lives apart, they took separate vacations through the years of their marriage in large part because she needed time to decompress from being in his presence. But, above all, his indifference to God and to the judgment of his life according to the Law of God was the pattern of his entire life. Churchill was not a Christian believer to be sure. He was not raised in a Christian home; far from it. We ought not to have expected a Christian worldview. But oddly Churchill constantly referred to God, to providence, even to judgment after death. He thought of Britain as a monument to *Christian* civilization. Still, according to Andrew Roberts (in a blog hosted by Jay Nordlinger) in the 5.2 million words he spoke in public, in the 6.1 million words he wrote, the name Jesus Christ does not appear a single time. What is more, says Roberts, to the extent that Churchill believed in God at all, God’s primary responsibility, in Churchill’s mind, seems to have been to take care of Winston Churchill. Alas, Churchill, over the entire course of his life, in reading all the books he read and writing his thirty some books, in all his interactions with others, never learned the one thing absolutely necessary to know. How a man like Churchill, of all men, could have supposed to the end that his life was a biochemical accident is simply beyond me!

The value of biographies is in large part their capacity to enable us to see a life in its entirety. There is much to be learned from a more expansive look at the beginning, the middle and the end of one’s life. For that very reason it is worth your thinking about your own life as it would appear in a faithful biography. And chief among the interests in that account would be how the difference would be measured between your youth and your age, between your early Christian

life and your mature faith and practice, between the impression of your life as a young disciple of Jesus Christ and the impression of your life made upon others years later.

I think that one of the problems we face in hearing an exhortation such as Peter's final one in his second letter – "Grow in the grace and the knowledge of the Lord" – is our first impression that the goal is too ill-defined and the means of reaching it too varied for us to know precisely what we ought to do. Precisely how does a Christian grow in the grace and the knowledge of the Lord? Of course, in the context the sentence begins with a "But," a contrast. One grows in the grace and knowledge of the Lord by refusing to be carried away by the intellectual and spiritual errors of the sort of men who were troubling the church at that very moment. In other words, these believers were to keep themselves under the teaching and the rule of faithful men. But, while important, that is hardly a sufficient explanation of how one grows, as if all one needed to do was to remain in a faithful, orthodox, Bible-believing church. On the other hand, this is obviously of fundamental importance. One will not grow as a Christian who allows himself or herself to be led away from biblical truth. Doctrine tells!

What is also important about that connection between vv. 17 and 18 is that Peter seems clearly to think that the only way to avoid falling back is to move forward. Standing still in the Christian life is a real danger precisely because a believer does not usually keep all the ground he or she has taken when no further effort is being made to move forward. *There is our motivation. If we are not moving forward, we will be slipping back!*

But take note of another fundamental point. Only living things can grow. If we have life in Christ, if we are new creatures in Christ, the life is already there. It must be nourished that it may grow stronger and stronger, but we do not have to, indeed we cannot create the life. God has done that. He alone can! Are you alive? That is the first question. There can be no growth if there is not first life. Are you a Christian? Peter's way of putting his exhortation forces us to ask ourselves that question, as do many such statements in the Bible. But certainly, most of you will answer that question with a resounding "Yes." You believe in the Lord Jesus; you are counting on his grace and work for your salvation; you are committed to living for him, poorly as we may do that day by day. We want to grow in his grace and knowledge.

But if we are alive in Christ, then we have potential to grow. We are all capable of more and better in our Christian lives. That possibility comes with the new life that God has given us. New life contains within it the principle of growth. I think this explains why so often in the Christian life we grow without any real intention or active effort on our part. We may not be thinking about growing up in the grace of Christ but being influenced by other believers, sitting under sermons, praying as Christians do, in the push and pull of life we find ourselves maturing even without much conscious effort. Such is life; it grows. We've seen this with plant life; how it sometimes grows in defiance of poor soil or a lack of water or sunshine. Plants were made to grow. And so, with spiritual life: it contains within itself a vital principle. But Peter doesn't mean – he very obviously doesn't mean here – that there is nothing required of us, that we will grow automatically or without any serious intention on our part. *He is commanding us to do something!*

And it seems to me that here is the key point. What Peter is asking of us is serious intention, a determination, a commitment to growth. We are not to take that growth for granted; we are to seek it. But *how* are we to seek it. Peter doesn't give us any specific instructions here. The Bible usually generalizes when it commands us to grow in grace and the knowledge of the Lord. As a result, as you may know, very different answers to that question have been given through the ages and into our own day. There have always been those who are sure that growth is to be found in some discovery, some secret wisdom that must be learned. It might be the discovery of the quietists who decry effort and urge you simply to wait upon God, to yield to his own working in your life. It might be the discovery of the Pentecostals who urge you to be filled with the Holy Spirit in a second profound experience of the grace of God that invests with new spiritual power. It might be the discovery of the spiritual technicians who will tell you how to organize your spiritual life for maximum growth. I think we can all agree that it won't be found through the miracle spring water marketed by Peter Popoff.

In the Bible there is no particular technique that is *the* key to spiritual growth; no secret wisdom to be learned, no experience that must first be gained. We are to depend upon the Lord without whom we can do nothing, and we are work out our salvation in fear and trembling. We are, as Paul said he did, to forget what lies behind and stain forward to what lies ahead, to press on. It is intention, concentration, and determination leading to prayer for grace and effective labor for the sake of our souls. And all of that, of course, involves different things at different times.

Of course, we are to read and study and reflect upon the Word of God. It is spiritual food to nourish our life in Christ. As Peter said in his first letter, this is the pure spiritual milk that baby Christians need to grow. There is so much to be learned from the Bible about God, about ourselves, about the way of faith in this world of sin. *I've been a professional student of the Bible now for a generation and I'm always learning new things – wonderful things! – from my study of the Word of God.* There is so much to be found in God's book to inspire us, to instruct us, to warn us, and give us discernment. Throughout the history of the church books written by men who were masters of the Bible have immensely helped believers to grow in the grace and knowledge of the Lord precisely because the truth of the Word of God was so helpfully distilled in those books. Books like Athanasius' *Life of St. Antony*, or Augustine's *Confessions* from early Christianity, John Owen's masterpieces of Christian sanctification in the 17th century, or Philip Doddridge's *Rise and Progress of Religion in the Soul*, in the 18th century, or *the Journals of Jim Elliot* in the 20th century, or James Smith's *You are What you Love* just a few years ago. Not a one of you in this sanctuary this evening is too old to read one of those great books. I can't tell you what great benefit I have got from books of that type through the years of my life. Almost every practiced Christian, almost every Christian whose mature life was an inspiration to other believers was a man or woman of the Word of God and most would be able to tell you the titles of some of the books that distilled the teaching of the Bible and made it live in their hearts.

And we are, of course, to be regularly at prayer. Our nearness to God, our consciousness of his presence is essential to maintaining momentum in the Christian life and, of course, so is the help we are given when we pray. The more you read Christian biography the more you will learn with what effort and by what means earnest Christians maintained their life of prayer; the struggle it was but also the great difference prayer made. There are books on prayer that also have inspired in many lives new efforts in conversation with God. Think of Alexander Whyte's *Lord Teach Us*

to Pray, or his *Lancelot Andrewes and his Private Devotions*, Andrew Murray's *With Christ in the School of Prayer*, or J. C. Ryle's *A Call to Prayer*, or C.S. Lewis' *Letters to Malcolm*, or Arthur Bennet's collection of Puritan prayers, *The Valley of Vision*. Again, these are books that helped me greatly and multitudes of others and I'm sure would inspire and instruct you as well. And if the life of prayer, which is to say communion with God, is key to maintaining progress in our Christian life, then learning from masters, learning from practiced Christians, learning from Christians who have discovered how to grow in the grace and the knowledge of the Lord is certainly a better use of your time than that next television show or that next video game. Read the great Christian biographies and learn from them how those saints studied the Word of God and how they prayed.

All of this means, of course, that you must be faithful in Christian worship – in which both the Word of God and prayer take first place – and which are the more powerful in their influence because of the greater presence of the Lord and the collective investment of a number of believers together. If where two or three are gathered in the Lord's name he is there in the midst of them, well, then we should want to be where he is! If the Lord sits enthroned on the praises of his people, we should all eagerly come to his throne room! It is interesting and instructive that in the history of the church, whenever the Holy Spirit is mightily at work, when believing people are filled with the Spirit, they go to church more often, sometimes every day. That is a feature of revivals: people can't get enough of worship, of preaching, and of corporate prayer. We might think they would say, "We have so much of the Spirit now that we can live the Christian life more successfully without constantly being in church. That is not what they thought. That is a lesson for us. If we were thinking and feeling correctly about our lives, we would be in church as often as we could be. And, conversely, if we don't really want to go to church it must be because we are not thinking correctly about our lives. Instead of being filled with the Spirit we are grieving him; instead of being led by the Spirit we are ignoring him.

But also important is sanctifying the experiences of our lives. I'm sure you have as I certainly have learned more from my stumbles than I have from my successes. I have been humbled and softened and made more sympathetic with others, I have learned from my sins and their aftermath hard truth about myself that otherwise I would have ignored, and I have come to a much deeper appreciation of the grace of God. And those are the most important lessons of all. I have learned how poorly I do when I am not actively depending upon the Lord and looking up to him and I have learned that my confidence in myself is an illusion. I've learned in the hard way that I cannot trust myself even at my best moments and that I need not despair even in my worst. [Lewis, *Mere Christianity*] But those lessons are taught only if we are awake to them, if we are sanctifying our experiences and drawing out their lessons. I remember Alexander Whyte saying, "The Devil would be a saint worshipping God every moment of the day if only would constantly review his past life and all of his sins." So many people live their lives without thinking at all or at least at all deeply about what their lives have been and how they have gone and why. You have enough learning in your own heart, in your own experience to make you the godliest of man or woman if only you will take those lessons to heart. This is a great deal of what the Bible means by meditation, by considering our ways. Socrates said that the unexamined life is not worth living. The Bible says that the unexamined life, the life from which no lessons are learned, the life that does not teach us true wisdom, is not a growing life. At 60 the Christian man or woman will scarcely know anything more of real importance than he or she knew at 25. Your

own heart, your own life, your own experience will make you a deep, thoughtful theologian and a caring, useful Christian if only you take the time and make the effort to learn the lessons they teach you. Isn't that also what Peter meant when he exhorted us to "grow in grace and the knowledge of the Lord?" The Lord is at work in your life. Study what it is he teaches you from your experience.

It is an important lesson for any and every Christian to learn that the great heroes of our faith, those who accomplished so much for Christ and his kingdom, men like William Wilberforce or Lord Shaftesbury, great social reformers who ended slavery and so much other injustice in British social life, or the great missionary pioneers, the fruit of whose work is only now producing an unprecedented harvest in many parts of the world, I say these men and women universally believed that their first order of business was their own life in Christ, their own relationship with God, their own personal godliness, devotion, and obedience. They were men and women of the Word, of prayer, and to the man or woman they reflected upon and thought about their lives as they unfolded day by day. They were masters of their own hearts before they were great achievers in the world.

There is much more to say, of course. As we know from our gardens, it isn't only water and sunlight that are necessary for plants to grow. The garden must be weeded as well. That is what Peter was doing in his second letter: pulling up the noxious weeds that would choke the growth of true Christian faith. Then there is the practice of obedience. So much is accomplished in the Christian life by exercise, by doing what we are called by the Lord to do. There is discipline, the cultivation of faithfulness in doing what is right and good. I could go on and on. But all of this is what is meant when Peter tells us to grow in the grace and the knowledge of the Lord. We know we are not where we ought to be; where we want to be as Christians. We are still a pale shadow of the profile of the earnest, faithful, devout, and loving disciple of Jesus Christ. We know *where* we need to go; we probably know pretty well what would help us get there. The question is: do we want to get there enough to take the steps we need to take? You will have to answer that question for yourself, of course, but you will be helped to answer it rightly if you will actually require the answer of yourself. Do I want to grow? If the honest answer is "No!" then at least do this: read 2 Peter once again – it will only take you twenty minutes – and ask yourself how you can justify your indifference in the light of the coming of Jesus Christ! Surely every Christian ought to want and want very much to grow in the grace and the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ! Knowing what we know, it could not be otherwise!