

THE DOCTRINE OF SANCTIFICATION *by Arthur W. Pink*

Chapter 31

The Progress of Sanctification (completed)

At the close of the last chapter we pointed out that the present aspect of our subject is one which deeply exercises many of God's people. It is with the desire to remove some of their difficulties and to throw light upon their problems that we devote another chapter thereto. Let us begin by mentioning several things which do not denote progress in personal and practical holiness. First, growth in grace is not an advancing in outward profession and ostentation, so that men shall "think of me above" what I am indeed (2 Cor. 12:6), but in inward and substantial godliness. When the roots of a tree do not strike deeper into the earth, yet its branches continue to spread, that is not true growth, for a strong wind will blow it over. Many people in Christendom are like that: there is a great spreading abroad outwardly and a plentiful show of leaves, but the fruits of vital piety are lacking.

Second, progress in holiness consists not in an increase of gifts or enlarged abilities for public service, but an increase in graces. The Corinthians grew fast in gifts, so that they were enriched "in all utterance and in all knowledge . . . so that they came behind in no gift" (1 Cor. 1:5, 7); nevertheless, the Apostle told them that they were but "babes" and "carnal" (1 Cor. 3:1, 3). And therefore did he point out to them "a more excellent way" (12:31), which (as Chapter 13 shows) was the presence and exercise of true grace, even love to God and love to our brethren, an ounce of which is of more real worth than a ton of gifts--for "though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not charity, I am become as sounding brass" (13:1). Ah, my reader, you may not be able to pray in

public as some do, you may lack their readiness of speech when talking of Divine things, you may not be sought after to occupy positions of prominence in the church, but if you have a tender conscience, an honest heart, a gentle spirit, a forbearing disposition, you have that which is far more valuable than any gifts for public use.

Third, an increase in fruitfulness is not to be measured by the success we have in our service to the Lord. If He has called you to preach the Gospel, and you now obtain fewer souls for your hire than was the case in former years, that is not (necessarily) to be taken as a proof of your spiritual decay. It is true that the conversion of souls under the labours of the Apostles is called "fruit" by Christ Himself (John 15:16), and it is also true that God generally makes the most use of those whose hearts and lives are the holiest. Yet it was through no recorded failure on his part that John the Baptist must "decrease" that Christ might "increase." Older ministers are often required to give place to younger ones, but this is not because of a decay of grace in them. If the minister's heart be large in its desires and he is faithful in his endeavours to do good, God will reckon more fruit to him than to others who are less faithful but more successful.

Fourth, growing in grace and the bringing forth of more fruit is not to be measured by the largeness or smallness of those opportunities we have for the doing of more or less good. Some that have the most grace are often stationed in isolated places and are largely unknown to their fellow Christians. Some have larger opportunities when they are young and less when old, and yet they bring forth more fruit before God than formerly, because He accepts the will for the deed. The public labours of the Baptist were ended when he was cast into prison, yet he brought forth precious fruits by not envying Christ because He secured his disciples, but rejoiced that the work of God went forward--more grace was expressed therein than in many sermons. So Paul spent much of his later life in prison, yet the fruit he brought forth there was quite as valuable as his preaching.

Fifth, increasing holiness is not to be measured by our inward comforts and joy, but rather by the more substantial qualities of faith, obedience, humility, and love. Very often it happens that the fragrant blossoms of ravishments fall off when the fruits of meekness, patience, and lowliness come on. What matters it though the gloss wear off, if the material be strong and substantial? Young Christians grow like new instruments: they have more varnish than the old, but they are not so sweet and mellow in sound. Often the decrease of joy is a means of increase of sincerity: lack of peace causes more exercise of faith, just as the taking away of floats compels the beginner to swim. One that has the assistance of floats and the stream with him, appears to swim as well as another with more experience and strength--but remove the floats from him and pit him against the stream, and his progress is not so swift, yet is it more sure.

Sixth, there is great danger of being deceived over inward affections, for even when they be drawn out unto Christ, yet their appearance may be greater than the reality. So often in a young Christian there is warm affection, yet much of self in it: great zeal, yet not a little of the energy of the flesh. He enters into duties more eagerly at first, but more spiritually later. New objects being set before him draw out after them the old nature as well as the principle received at regeneration. It was thus with Israel of old. They were obedient to Moses' call, and sang Jehovah's praises after their deliverance at the Red Sea; yet it was not long before the mixed multitude lusted after the fleshpots of Egypt, and only the spiritual were satisfied with the heavenly manna. When fire is first kindled there is more smoke, but after the flames come that control all into a narrower compass, the fire hath more heat in it. The believer's affections become purer, less mixed with the vapours of self-love as he grows in grace.

Seventh, we must not seek to determine our progress in holiness by any one grace or the performance of any particular duty, but take in the entire extent and latitude of character and conduct. One who has grown much in grace may be less in some kinds of duties than he was when a babe

in Christ. Probably we then spent most of our available time in praying, reading, and meditating. Because we spend less time in them now, that is no proof of our spiritual decay: there are other duties to be performed which in earlier days were neglected, but are now made conscience of. To have more time available for prayer and reading is most delightful to a spiritual soul, yet the faithful discharge of business or domestic responsibilities is more profitable to others and more pleasing to God, if He has so appointed them. The mother who is faithful in the home honours God just as truly and fully as the most self-sacrificing missionary.

But let us turn now to the positive side and note some of the indications in and characters of an increase in holiness. First, we grow when we are led on to exercise new graces, and so "add" one to another as 2 Peter 1:5-7 enjoins. As our knowledge of Scripture increases, affections are awakened answerable to the truths newly discovered to us. At first the Christian does not exercise all the graces of the new man, though all are in him. As in the natural we first live a life of semi-consciousness, then one governed by the physical senses, and then one of reason, it is much the same in the spiritual. There are various "grades" or "standards" which Christians go through, as children at school rise from inferior to the higher. First we are placed under the Law and have heart exercises awakened by its requirements; then under the Gospel other affections are stirred into activity.

Second, we are increasing in holiness when the same graces advance, as when the Christian's love grows "fervent" (1 Peter 4:8). Faith at first is like a tiny mustard seed, but afterwards it develops into a tree. An awakened sinner often casts himself upon Christ much as a drowning man clutches at a passing spar: later, he has a more intelligent perception of His suitability and worth; until he attains unto "full assurance of faith." Thus in godly sorrow: when from mourning for sin because it is contrary to God's holiness, we go on to mourning over sin as grieving to Him who loves us, we are growing in grace. So when we have more strength to resist temptations.

So in prayer: when our petitions are more for spiritual blessings than for material mercies, when we learn to plead with God in a Scriptural manner, when we pray much for others.

Third, we are increasing in holiness when the duties we perform and the fruits we bear are more ripe, that is, more spiritual, and less juicy, that is, emotional. Though they grow now in size or number--we pray not more nor longer--yet they are more holy, or more savoury and solid. It is a mistake to measure spiritual growth by the multitude of our performances: God prizes quality far more highly than He does quantity. When one is sick or aged, he is obliged to be less in active duties, but increased spirituality in those he can engage in, more than makes up for this. One short prayer put up in faith, with a broken heart, is in God's sight more fruit than a long one or a day spent in formal fasting; in the same sense that the "widow's mite" was more than all the other gifts cast into the treasury.

Fourth, an increase of holiness is indicated by the soul's becoming more firmly rooted in Christ, and this makes the fruits more acceptable unto God. By being more rooted in Christ, we mean the believer's living more out of himself and in Christ. At our conversion we were emptied of self-righteousness, and as we grow in grace we become emptied of our strength, wisdom, abilities, so that we recognize with increasing clearness that without Him we can do nothing. So of our service. "Not I, but Christ in me" is our ready acknowledgement. Consequently when "growth in grace" is mentioned "and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ" (2 Peter 3:18) is at once added by way of explanation--for there can be no real growing in grace except as we increase in the vital and experimental knowledge of Christ. As to "worship God in the spirit, and rejoice in Christ Jesus, and have no confidence in the flesh" (Phil. 3:3) are the surest signs of grace, so of genuine growth.

Fifth, the more we bring forth fruit in season, the more fruit we may be said to bear, for it is the timeliness of them which enhances their value. In the natural, fruit which is forced by artificial means is never so wholesome

as that which is ripened normally by the sun. There is a time for everything. To be studying the Bible when I should be taking needful recreation, to be praying when I should be discharging other duties, to regale myself by happy fellowship with other Christians when I ought to be visiting the sick, or attending to the public means of grace when home duties plainly call for my attention, is to bring forth untimely fruit. So to rebuke when I should comfort, or comfort when I should rebuke: "a word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in settings of silver" (Prov. 25:11). In Psalm 1 the righteous man is said to bring forth fruit "in his season." Young Christians are often set on good works by the Devil which they are not yet qualified to perform.

Sixth, when we grow more constant in performing duty, more even in a godly course, and more settled in our spiritual affections, it is a sure sign that we are growing. Youth is more unstable than maturity, more given to change. The young believer is more influenced by his emotions than his judgment, and therefore more easily carried away by religious excitement--and more quickly discouraged when things go wrong. The development of patience and perseverance is a clear mark of spiritual growth. To go by fits and starts, to be much in duties for a while and then almost abandon them, to be on a mountain top one day and down in the valley the next is a character of immaturity and weakness. But being not weary in well-doing in the face of opposition, to continue pressing forward despite many failures, to go on seeking grace notwithstanding many refusals, denotes growth.

Seventh, we may be said to be increasing in holiness when, although difficulties increase and opportunities lessen, we continue faithfully therein. An orchard which produces fruit in a cold and uncongenial season, though it be less in quantity and quality, is really for it (relatively) to yield more than if the year had been a warm and propitious one. The Lord takes into account the times and circumstances in which our lot is cast: "I know thy works, and thy labour, and thy patience" (Rev. 2:2). Fidelity to Christ means far more in such an evil day as ours than if we were in the midst of a Heaven-sent revival. Little is regarded by God as much as when His child has had to stand

almost alone, when his strictness has been almost universally scoffed at by modern religionists.

Our object in this chapter is to resolve a case of conscience, rather than handle the subject of spiritual growth in either a doctrinal or hortatory manner. Instead of discoursing upon progressive holiness in general, or seeking to urge believers thereto, we have sought to indicate, both negatively and positively some of the marks of growth in grace that an exercised soul might be able to discern more clearly his actual condition. It is most important that we should be able to judge rightly of our case and not flatter ourselves on the one hand, nor deprecate ourselves on the other: some are more tempted to the former, others to the latter. It is easy to make a mistake and jump to a wrong conclusion. As in the physical realm many suffering from insidious diseases suppose they are healthy, while others who are sound and vigorous imagine they are ill, so it is spiritually.

While it is the duty and privilege of the Christian to ascertain what progress Divine grace is enabling him to make in his spiritual course, and to be assured he is not a fruitless branch of the Vine, yet God does not intend that he should be satisfied with his attainments or fall in love with himself. Far from it--rather is it His design that he should live more and more out of himself, upon Christ. And it is for this reason that He suffers the most spiritual of His people to be constantly plagued by indwelling sin, and sees to it that they are kept continually busy in fighting the weeds that are ever threatening to crowd out the flowers and fruit in the garden of their souls. Should they become at all self-complacent, He will soon stain their pride by withholding the dews of His Spirit, and then their graces speedily wilt and wither. In such a case they are hard put to perceive any fruit at all.

In addition to all that has been said above, let it be pointed out that subsequent growth in grace is not nearly so apparent to our senses as first conversion is. That is a radical change from death unto life, from being brought out of darkness unto God's marvelous light, from no grace at all to the beginnings of grace in us--whereas that which follows is renewing of the

life already received, additions of light, and further degrees of grace. To be translated out of a prison to a kingdom as Joseph was, would affect him far more than to have a new kingdom added to him later, as Alexander had. The very newness of grace in the first instance makes a much stronger impression upon the heart and understanding than do the later additions of it. When one takes up any art or science, growth is prompt, because everything we read thereon is novel; whereas later, the same things are met with again and again, and that which is new is harder to discover, though now he learns more perfectly what he previously knew.

Again: time must be allowed for growth and the discovery of it. "When for the time ye ought to be teachers" (Heb. 5:12), implies that a sufficient space had elapsed for them to have passed the infantile stage. The sun's rising is slow and by degrees, so that its progress cannot be perceived till after its motion for an hour or so. Let it be remembered that things most excellent have the slowest development. Bulrushes, and the weaker kind of plants shoot up swiftly, but oaks and other more solid trees grow very slowly. Moreover, there are great differences in the pace of growth even among the same specie of trees or animals; so it is spiritually. God has appointed the measure of growth in all His people, yet they are brought to the fullness in very different times and ways.

Growth in mortification is evidenced by our denying self more and more, by the things of this world making less of an appeal upon us, and by a steadier and more regular watching over our hearts. Such work is new to us at first, and the putting forth of unaccustomed efforts is always more taxing than actions we are used to; but as the habit is formed, the strain is not noticed so much. Moreover, an increase of spiritual (not intellectual) light exhibits filthy corners in the heart hitherto unsuspected; consequently, the farther one proceeds with God the more spiritual his conflict becomes. When the believer resists not only the grosser worldly and fleshly lusts, but also makes conscience of pride, self-confidence, impatience, unworthy motives,

the weakness of his faith and the sparseness of his love, then is he indeed growing in grace.

Growth in vivification is evidenced in further supplies of grace and the effects they produce. It may be asked whether every new degree of grace affects the whole of our souls, or if it be confined to one faculty? The answer is the former, for as every new degree of light (as the sun rises) shines throughout the whole hemisphere, so new grace is diffused throughout the entire man--understanding, conscience, affections, and will--just as it did at our conversion. But may not one grace grow more than the other? Growth in our bodies is proportionate, one member together with another; so our graces all languish or thrive together. But some graces are exercised more, and so abound more: just as though our two arms both grow, yet through employing the right one more constantly, it becomes stronger than the left.

It may be of interest to enquire whether this increase in grace be only by the normal and spontaneous development of the graces, or by a new addition to them? The latter: just as a cloth comes out a deeper colour each time it be dipped in the dye, every new degree of grace is by a fresh act of creation put forth by God. Therefore when David, being fallen, prayed for an increase of grace, he cried, "create in me a clean heart, O God" (Psa. 51:10). He who begins the work, by the same power, perfects it. Every new degree of grace is called a fresh conversion: "when thou art converted" said Christ to Peter (Luke 22:32) who was converted already. It is God who "giveth the increase" (1 Cor. 3:7). Yet, as pointed out in previous chapters, our concurrence is required. (For much in the above we are indebted to Thomas Goodwin).

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