

## 013: The Process of Spiritual Growth (based on Ch. 12 from *The End of the Pilgrimage*)

In previous studies I have talked extensively about the ACCOUNT we must all give at the Judgment Seat of Christ and the VERDICT that Jesus will pronounce upon our individual lives

- that verdict will determine our place in His kingdom
- I intend to speak a great deal more about that in future studies, but I would like to dedicate THIS study to talk about how we can prepare to hear “well done” at the Bema Seat
- to hear those precious words, we must be progressively sanctified over the course of our lives, growing and maturing in the Lord
- but many Christians are confused about this
- they don’t really know HOW to grow spiritually, in a manner that pleases the Lord
- in this study I am going to discuss the process of spiritual growth and share what the Bible says are the AGENTS of spiritual growth and maturity
- understanding this is so important for preparing to meet Jesus and being able to give an account that pleases Him

Is it possible for a believer to have a sincere heart that wants to please the Lord, accompanied by busyness in ministry and service, and yet perform in the power of the flesh rather than in the Spirit?

- Absolutely!
- In fact, it is one of the most common deceptions in Christian life and ministry, and Satan loves every minute of it.
- A lifetime of works-sanctification will undoubtedly result in disinheritance at the Judgment Seat.

- When a believer equates works-sanctification with spiritual growth, the result is no growth.
- At times, that child of God may get in a bind, with no way to turn, and under pressure rely on the Lord for enablement to have victory in time of need.
- When that happens on occasion, there will be growth.
- But the growth will not be steady unless this becomes the pattern of life.
- In other words, spiritual growth will be erratic.

On the other hand, when a believer learns to regularly appropriate the enabling power of the Holy Spirit to withstand temptation and endure trials, he will be experiencing regular, steady growth in the Christian life.

- The word sanctification means to be set apart – from sin and to God
- But in a practical sense, progressive sanctification is the lifelong process of learning to let Christ live His life through us.
- I used to say it is the process of becoming more like Christ.
- I don’t say that any more, because it is confusing and, therefore, easily misunderstood.
- Some have abused the meaning of “becoming more like Christ,” by mistakenly putting the emphasis on what man must do in the process, rather than focusing on the object, Jesus, and what we must let Him do in us.
- There is a difference, and it’s not as subtle as it seems.
- To be sure, sanctification is a process, but we need to yield to God’s process, not superimpose our own ideas as to what the process should be.

For example, Thomas à Kempis wrote a book in the fifteenth century called, *The Imitation of Christ*, that muddies the waters as to man's involvement in sanctification.

- So many have fallen prey to the same error.
- Imitating Christ-like behavior is a biblical concept, if understood and taught correctly.
- For example, the apostle Paul said:
- **1 Cor. 11:1** Imitate me, just as I also *imitate* Christ.
- **Eph. 5:1** Be imitators of God as dear children.
- However, Thomas à Kempis made it a fleshly effort by putting the emphasis on what *we* must *do*, to the exclusion of Christ's enablement.
- Paul did not have that understanding and boldly proclaimed in Gal. 2:20:
- **Gal. 2:20** I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the *life* which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me.
- Did you notice that Paul emphasizes depending on Christ by faith for victory?
- that is the key

Of ourselves, it is not possible to imitate Christ, no matter how hard we try.

- Indeed, by "trying" without supernatural enablement, we are injecting fleshly, self-dependence.
- Another example is the book *In His Steps*, written by the liberal theologian, Charles Sheldon.
- Many Christians have no idea that Sheldon did not hold to the fundamentals of the faith but rather promoted a social gospel; he was quite liberal.
- Yet, how many quote his cliché, "What would Jesus do?"
- ... which has been popularized in modern culture by marketing experts who want to prosper from the WWJD

catchphrase, selling bracelets, necklaces, and other paraphernalia?

- Never mind that Sheldon was totally off base in his theology.

Sheldon's question is dangerous, for it puts man in the driver's seat, rather than the Scriptures, encouraging him to play a sort of spiritual situation ethics.

- Even a lost man can attempt to play this game.
- It is really no more than a modern spin on the old, self-dependent "imitation" model of sanctification as proposed by Thomas à Kempis.
- Both of these books, as noble as they sound, actually promote flesh-dependence.
- Again, biblical sanctification is the lifelong process of learning to let Christ live His life through us.
- It is summed up well in Gal. 2:20.
- As one submits to the process, he grows spiritually.
- If one does not understand the process correctly or refuses to yield to the Holy Spirit's working in his life, growth will be stunted.
- Ongoing, experiential sanctification and spiritual growth are, therefore, closely related concepts.

Spiritual growth is not instantaneous.

- It happens over time.
- While I doubt any Christian would dispute that statement (after all, the word *growth* implies a continuing process), some *essentially* argue the opposite. How so?
- By looking to past, life-changing events (a decision during an invitation, a spiritual crisis that precipitated an "I surrender all" moment) as the building blocks of spiritual growth.

- Others equate participation in religious activities (Bible-reading, prayer, church attendance, soul-winning programs, etc.) with spiritual growth.
- While events and religious activities may be catalysts toward change and growth, they certainly don't guarantee growth.
- Too often, decisions are based on emotion and tend to fade in short time.
- In the case of religious activities, they can become ritualistic, and tend to salve one's conscience with thoughts such as "this activity makes me spiritual."
- That is, of course, wrong thinking, and is a deadening form of legalism.

As Americans, we want it now, and we expect it now.

- Classic illustrations of our cultural impatience can be seen in microwave ovens and drive-thru windows at fast-food joints, where we expect to get service in two minutes or less.
- Unfortunately, we often carry our cultural expectations into our Christianity.
- We want spiritual maturity now, and we expect it now.
- Oh, how our eternal God, who is not bound by time, must sigh at our impatience!
- He is the epitome of patience, and for that we should be truly grateful, because His eternal patience results in His not giving up on us.
- Spiritual growth is actually a life-long process that starts when we are saved and continues over time throughout the Christian life.
- It is gradual and incremental.
- The Scriptures beautifully define and describe the two key agents of spiritual growth in 2 Pet. 3:18 and the process of spiritual growth in Rom. 5:1-5.

- We will look at both texts and the two agents.

Let's start with ...

- **2 Pet. 3:18** But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.
- the first agent of spiritual growth is the **ENGRAFTED** (or we could say **IMPLANTED** Word)
- Growth comes, in part, through knowledge of Christ, as Peter says in 2 Peter 3:18.
- However, it is not merely knowledge *about* Him.
- It is *His* knowledge!
- We already have the mind of Christ, according to 1 Cor. 2:16.
- How, then, do we appropriate it?
- By His Spirit whom He has given us.
- **1 Cor. 2:12** Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might know the things that have been freely given to us by God.
- Of course, the Holy Spirit uses the written Word of God to open up for us the mind of Christ.

I believe the Holy Spirit is the engrafted (implanted) Word, referred to in James 1:21:

- **James 1:21** Receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls.
- How can I conclude the Holy Spirit is the engrafted Word?
- In **Col. 3:16** we are commanded, *Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly.*
- Many commentators point out the fact that Col. 3:16 is parallel to Eph. 5:18.
- Indeed, the verses following, in both passages, speak of the same things — spiritual Christians singing, wives

submitting, husbands loving, children obeying, employees obeying, etc. — All of which flows from a Spirit-filled life.

- The parallel to the command, *Be filled with the Spirit*, **Eph. 5:18**, is *Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly*, **Col. 3:16**.

In both cases, the reference is to the Holy Spirit — otherwise known as the Word of Christ — dwelling within.

- He is the engrafted (implanted) Word, and He is able to save your soul.
- The phrase *save your souls*, in its context in **James 1:21**, does not mean to save from eternal condemnation.
- It means to sanctify.
- Thus the child of God is commanded to receive with meekness (i.e., accept with humility) the engrafted Word — the Holy Spirit — who teaches us the written Word and impresses upon our heart truths that we need in order to grow.
- In other words, He sanctifies us through the Word.
- Jesus prayed, *Sanctify them by Your truth: Your word is truth*, **John 17:17**.
- So the first agent of spiritual growth is the Spirit of God, the engrafted (implanted) Word, who imparts unto us the mind of Christ through the written Word.
- **Rom. 10:17** *Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God.* Rom. 10:17.

The second agent of spiritual growth is GRACE

- Grace is a marvelous spiritual concept.
- It is a priceless commodity, given to us by God.
- Ironically, grace is the very thing we most desperately need but most often spurn.
- In a salvific sense, grace is God's unmerited favor.

- But let's get more practical.
- In a sanctification sense, grace is God's divine enablement to do what He wants us to do.
- Grace is God giving us what we need to win in every situation — to win over temptation to sin; to win in how we respond to trials; to win in our responses to people; etc.
- We need grace every moment of every day.

If the righteousness of Christ is our *provision* to win, grace is God's tailor-made *application* of it in every particular situation.

- He always gives a big dose — *He gives more grace*, **James 4:6**.
- His promise to every Christian is found in:
- **2 Cor. 12:9** My grace is sufficient for you.
- The well of grace never runs dry!
- If that is not your experience, then you have one of two problems.
- (Incidentally, the problem is never God; it is always man).
- The first possible problem is that you may be spurning God's grace by your pride.
- *"God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble"* **James 4:6**.
- Pride comes in many forms, of course, but the kind that typically spurns God's grace is the kind that thinks, "I can do this," or "I will try harder."
- Any attitude of self-sufficiency or self-dependence will result in spurning God's grace.

If you have not found God's grace to be sufficient, then a possible second problem is not knowing how to access God's grace, even though the answer is plainly given in the Scriptures.

- So you must learn the hard way, in the spiritual “school of hard knocks,” so to speak.
- You get into a situation – a trial, a temptation, and you are failing because you have been depending on self.
- Indeed, you have fallen numerous times in the past, and you are tired of it.
- Perhaps by being overwhelmed with pressure and sorrow, you finally come to the end of your rope.
- In desperation, you cry out, “Help me, Lord!”
- Our gracious God, in His Providence, has allowed you to stumble upon the secret to victory: realizing the utter folly of self-reliance that always fails; turning in complete reliance on Christ who always wins.

The most basic aspect of spiritual growth is learning to depend on the Lord, specifically, the Holy Spirit who lives within.

- He guides us in all truth, through the Word of God and dispenses grace as needed, to the extent we depend on Him.
- If only we would learn to continue depending!
- Is that not the essence of abiding in the vine?
- According to 2 Pet. 3:18, the agents of spiritual growth are 1) the engrafted (implanted) Word, the Holy Spirit, who imparts to us the mind of Christ through the written Word; and 2) grace, which the Holy Spirit dispenses, as needed.
- How do we access the agent of grace?
- **Rom. 5:1-2** Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom also we have access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God.

A key is required for accessing God’s grace

- I have a key that gives entrance to my house.
- If I lose my key, and no one else is home, I will never get access to the house until I find the key.
- I can look in the windows.
- I can imagine everything inside. I can wish I were inside.
- I can protest my situation and demand that I be given entrance, because I am the rightful owner of the house.
- But none of these things will gain me entrance.
- I must have the key.
- So it is in the spiritual life with respect to grace.
- It is freely mine (2 Cor. 12:9; James 4:6).
- I stand upon it (Rom. 5:2).
- Nevertheless, I will never experience its application in my life without the key.
- I can wish for it. I can demand it. I can even cry and bemoan the fact that grace is not at my disposal.
- But, like my house, I will never get access without a key.

What is the key that unlocks (accesses) grace?

- It is faith – dependence on God, as opposed to self-dependence.
- Faith, in this context, is a choice to rely upon God to appropriate His grace in any given situation, whether victory over sin or endurance amidst trials, etc.
- It is trusting in the Lord with all the heart rather than leaning to our own understanding.
- It is asking for God’s enablement, in any given situation, and then believing He has *already* given it.
- When we learn to unlock God’s storehouse of grace through the key of dependence on the Holy Spirit, we will be rejoicing in hope (i.e., in the confident expectation) that God is being glorified in our lives.
- He is glorified when Christ is living His life through us.

In vs. 3-5 we find the process by which we grow spiritually, or we could say, the means by which we are sanctified in our Christian lives.

- **Rom. 5:3-4** And not only *that*, but we also glory in tribulations, knowing that tribulation produces perseverance; and perseverance, character; and character, hope.
- **Rom. 5:5** Now hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who was given to us.
- God teaches us greater dependence on Himself via *tribulations*, or we could say, *trials*.
- Critical to spiritual growth is learning to respond rightly to trials.
- God calls it “glorying in tribulations.”
- The word *tribulations* encompasses a range of troubles: trials, afflictions, suffering, persecution, even daily pressures — traffic pressures, workplace pressures, financial pressures, family pressures, etc.
- Spiritual growth results when we learn to glory in our troubles.

That certainly does not come naturally.

- Our tendency is to sing the blues rather than sing praise to God amidst troubles.
- Indeed, the only way a Christian can genuinely rejoice in troubles is by accessing God’s grace through dependence on the Holy Spirit.
- Only then will Jesus live His life through us — and He always responds rightly amidst troubles!
- Interestingly, the word *glory* in v. 3 is entirely different than *glory* in v. 2.

- The Greek word *doxa* is used in v. 2, from which we get the English word *doxology* — an ascription of praise.
- When you are responding to God in complete dependence amidst trials, you are rejoicing with confident expectation that God is being glorified — praised and honored — by your life.

However, the word *glory* in v. 3 is a different Greek word with an entirely different meaning.

- It is the idea of boasting in a good sense, or *rejoicing*.
- In fact, in v. 2 the same Greek word is translated *rejoicing*.
- Thus, glorying in your tribulations is the idea of rejoicing in your troubles.
- **James 1:2** puts it this way: *Count it all joy when you fall into various trials.*
- There is no way in the world we can do that of ourselves.
- Our natural tendency is to chafe at our troubles and to do everything in our power to escape them or sidestep the pain.
- But a growing Christian will learn (in ever-increasing intensity) to rejoice in his troubles as he depends upon God’s grace amidst the troubles.

Is rejoicing in troubles an end in itself? Absolutely not!

- God tells us why we should rejoice in troubles: *knowing that tribulation produces perseverance (Rom. 5:3).*
- Troubles — to the extent we learn to rejoice in the midst of them — will produce patience in our lives.
- What good is that? Patience is endurance; it is durative faith, faith that never lets up; faith that keeps trusting; dependence that bears up under the pressure.
- Our problem, typically, is that we trust God here and there, but we don’t trust Him completely and at all times.

- Troubles help us learn to trust God at all times!

A Christian who is regularly depending on God's grace to bear up under the pressure of troubles, is growing.

- Jesus is living His life through that person.
- Incidentally, learning patience (that is, perseverance or endurance) takes time — one trial at a time.
- That's why in v. 3 God says that patience (perseverance) produces character (the KJV says *experience*).
- Experience is knowledge that is accumulated by participating in something repeatedly, over time.
- In this case, it's over a lifetime.
- God doesn't expect us to learn to endure under pressure perfectly in the first few months of the Christian life.
- It takes years of troubles of varying types for us to learn to trust Him in all things.
- Thankfully, God is patient with us as we are learning.
- But we should be learning through trials, not chafing at them, and our learning should be producing an experience and maturity that is invaluable.
- When we chafe and do not progress, He brings discipline into our lives to help to bring us to the place where we will progress.

Notice in Rom. 5:3 where this wonderful experience leads.

- As you are experiencing God's enabling power to give victory in your troubles, time after time again, you will become a person of hope.
- Hope is not wishful thinking. As stated earlier, in a biblical sense, hope is confident expectation — not confidence in self, but confidence in God.
- Think about it.
- If you have experienced God giving you grace to respond with joy in trouble after trouble, you are going to

become a person who *confidently expects* God to work all the time — not only in your life, but also in the lives of others.

- You will be consistently joyful; you will be consistently optimistic.
- The optimism is not merely a positive mental attitude.
- It is a confident spirit, based on God, whom you know to be true *all the time*!

People who live in the realm of hope are not ashamed (that's the King James word used).

- And they are not disappointed (that's the New King James word used)
- In fact, hope is so confident in the Lord that it is bold; it does not cower in fear.
- This is not merely personality boldness; it is boldness that only the Holy Spirit can produce.
- It is the kind of boldness that endures under the most intense form of troubles — persecution, even death for Christ.
- The Christian who has learned through experience to rejoice amidst troubles by depending on God's grace will be ready to meet the persecution with boldness.

The climax of the passage — the ultimate end of spiritual growth — is found in v. 5, *the love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit.*

- God wants us all to mature to the point of becoming genuinely loving Christians, but agape-type love is rarely found in the lives of most Christians.
- It is seen in those who are described as being like Jesus, because Jesus is living His life through them.

- Love (as a way of life, not merely a burst here or there) is characteristic in the lives of those Christians who have learned to depend upon God's grace to enable them to rejoice in their troubles, over a period of time, so that it becomes their experience, their character
- Because they have so experienced God's deliverance for victory over and over again, they are confident people in the Lord, expecting God to do great things all the time.
- After living in that realm of life for some period of time, hope graduates to love, the ultimate.

Three of the key words in this passage are *faith* (v. 2), *hope* (v. 4), and *love* (v. 5) — the very three words the apostle Paul uses to sum up the Christian life at the end of 1 Cor. 13.

- These are the three things that matter, no doubt the three things that will survive God's fire at the Judgment Seat.
- Everything else that is accomplished in life apart from faith or hope or love will be burned up!
- The most basic element of this triplet is *faith* — dependence on God — the very thing that unlocks God's grace.
- Ironically, it is the starting point of a sanctified life, yet so few Christians seem to grasp the concept of depending on the Lord for a rejoicing spirit amidst their troubles.
- No wonder Christians do not bear up under pressure.
- No wonder Christians are lacking in confident expectation, the divine optimism that results in boldness that is eager to suffer and die for Jesus.
- No wonder Christianity is bereft of self-sacrificing, unconditional love.
- The problem is that so many, despite being saved for decades, have never really progressed in sanctification

because they have never learned to appropriate God's grace by faith.

- Oh, may we see our great need and learn to grow in grace!
- I challenge you to THINK ON THESE THINGS!