

Contributions.

Growth in Grace.

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To-day I met a little friend, and said, "Why, Edwin, how you grow! What do you do to cause you to grow so fast?" Five year o'd Edwin, proud and happy, doffed his cap, and answered gayly, "I guess it must be because I keep on eating the things to make me grow." I laughed at the quaint reply, but soon saw there was wisdom in it. Unconsciously the little lad had preached me a very strong sermon. He was logical. He ate plentifully of the food that would produce healthful growth, and as a natural result, he could not fail to grow. And then I remembered the command, "Grow in grace and knowledge," and I saw the parallel between the child's merry words and the lesson my father would teach me.

No truth is more emphatically taught by the sacred writers than that spiritual life must be a continuous growth. We are born into the kingdom of God. First we are babes in Christ, then we reach the period of youth, and at last we attain the perfect stature of the full grown man or woman.

The child, reaching out toward manhood, finds much to learn, and there is a vast fund of knowledge the Christian must gain before, spiritually, he is a full grown man. This is gained only at the feet of Jesus. He who stoops to the lowest place at his Master's feet will be the one chosen to climb the loftiest heights to do His service.

The first step toward growth in grace is to know Christ as our personal Saviour. All knowledge about Christ will avail us naught unless, ultimately, we learn Christ Himself. Knowing Jesus, it is impossible not to grow. To grow is to live. To cease to grow is speedily to die. Indeed growth is a proof of life. All the cultivation in the world could never cause a post to grow and bear fruit; while a very tiny seed, placed in favorable environments, will develop into a mighty, shade giving, fruit bearing tree. Hence, to grow not only implies that we be planted in grace, but that divine power has enkindled within us the vital spark of spiritual life. This germ, like the mustard seed, may at first be seemingly insignificant; but, again like the mustard seed, it may become a benediction to all around.

Works will not create life. They only reveal the inner life. Christ touches the natural life, and immediately the spiritual life leaps into being. This is Christ's work. Nothing can be

substituted for this. But when life is brought into existence, then growth and development rests with us. The natural babe, left at its birth and deprived of needed food and shelter, soon will die. The spiritual babe treated thus would do the same. We can no more thrive on past grace or past experience than we can on yesterday's food. This is as true of churches as of individuals. The church that tries to live on the merits of its dead heroes will soon be more hopelessly dead than the heroes whom they lauded and, parasite like, tried to live upon.

Past experience is good when used as a stepping stone to better things for the present, but it is utterly useless unless we can mount upon it to climb onward and upward to richer faith and to nobler achievements. Paul teaches us to press onward, to forget everything that is behind; to forget our cares, our fears, yea, even our triumphs, as we steadily press toward the high mark which will be higher still to-morrow.

We grow in grace as rapidly as we want to grow. We are as large, spiritually, as we desire to be. "Unto him that hath shall more be given, but unto him that hath not shall be taken away, even that which he hath." If we wish to be giants in Christ Jesus we can become giants. If we are content to be spiritual dwarfs we will surely be.

Wesley and Whitfield and Bunyan and Spurgeon and Moody would never have stood upon such conspicuous and, to us, dizzy heights unless they had first paid the price. They learned that to truly live to God they must fully die to self. Freely they did this, and the result was those mighty giants, who, honored by God, were a blessing to all the world.

Spiritual growth is as much regulated by law as is natural growth. If, like the little lad who gave us our text, we constantly partake of such nourishment as tends to develop us we will surely grow. "Blessed are they who hunger and thirst after righteousness, for they shall be filled." I do not believe my little friend ever eats when he is not hungry, but, being an ideal boy, he is always hungry. If we stint ourselves we can, after a while, manage to exist upon very little nourishment; but the healthy, useful man or woman needs regular, systematic diet. If content with leanness of soul, our soul will soon be very lean; but if we genuinely hunger and thirst after spiritual food, we will seek it, we will partake of it freely, and, unconsciously, we will grow. Yes, we expand or dwarf our stature according to our own desire. If I want more grace I can have it. If I

want less it is within my power to diminish my present supply. He who wants just enough religion to enter heaven may possibly get there—I do not know—but it will be a very lean soul that will be admitted. But there is danger that the soul who wants a great deal of this world and a very little of the next will be quite dead long before animal life is extinct. The growing soul never asks, "Is this necessary for my salvation?" It only asks, "Lord, how can I serve Thee?"

If I would enter heaven, my heaven must commence on earth. In other words, if I would enter heaven after I die, heaven must enter me before I die. If I would escape hell after death, I must escape hell before death. Some one has said, "Both heaven and hell in eternity are but the completed conditions of life on earth." If I love the service of God I cannot be kept out of heaven. If I shrink from it, and love the service of the world, I cannot be kept out of hell, for hell has already commenced within me. God neither debar me from heaven nor consigns me to hell. My own will decides this question for me.

Not for works would I imply that salvation is of works. It is Christ's rich mercy, and that alone, that saves. I can never earn grace; it is the gift of God. But after I have been made partaker of the heavenly gift, then it is my privilege to so cultivate the soil into which I have been transplanted that much fruit for my Master will be the result.

Growth depends upon appropriating the means which tend to strengthen life. No amount of cultivation or of appropriation can create life, yet both are needed to develop it. What is needed for spiritual growth? The same that is needed for the physical—food, air, sunshine, exercise and congenial association. It is difficult for the spirit rapidly to grow in grace, if deprived of any of its necessary environments. Spiritual food is prayer, frequent prayer, meditation and constant study of God's word. We should ever breathe a spiritual atmosphere. We should dwell in the presence of the Father. And this is sunshine, no matter how dark the temporal clouds may be. All we do should be done in the name of Jesus, whether we preach a sermon or wash dishes, go as a missionary to Africa, or soothe and nurse cross children. We should, as far as possible, surround ourselves with helpful associates and strengthening mental good. Nothing tends more to advance or to retard growth than does the literature with which we surround ourselves.

But a prayerful spirit will soon command all the necessary means. It will not study impure books. It will not read vile papers. It will not grope in the dark, for prayer lights a wonderful lamp which throws a brilliant radiance as far as the eye of faith can see. A praying soul will not dwell in impure atmosphere. It will not needlessly associate with scoffers. It finds delight in the study of God's word, and will not be content save in service for the Master.

No place like the closet to grow in grace, yet he who remains forever in the closet will cease to grow.

"Seek thy God alone by prayer
And thou shalt doubt, perchance despair,
But seek him also by endeavor
And thou shalt find him gracious ever."

So then a good place to grow is in active service. Anxiety for the salvation of others is a mighty factor for growth. Sacrifice, whether by giving our life to a cause or denying ourselves fifty cents' pleasure that another may be helped, breaking our night's rest to minister to the sick, checking the cutting retort we so desire to make, forcing back the desponding sigh and showing a cheery, sunny face to those about us. All these are wonderful stimulants to growth.

It is the liberal soul that is to be made fat. It is the one who freely waters that shall himself be watered. It is the one who loses his life—and life means convenience, comforts, pleasures, all that goes to make up life—who is to find it again, only more abundantly. If we would have that "abundant entrance" into the kingdom, we must make considerable progress this side of Jordan. It is as true that there are degrees in heaven as that "one star differeth from another star." I fear it will take a long while after I pass through the pearly gates ere I attain such heights as those to which Paul and Spurgeon mounted when they were first admitted.

Happy? Yes, I will be as happy as it will be possible for me to be; for my capacity for enjoyment will depend upon the manner I am now cultivating that capacity. Oh, Saviour mine, help me to live so very far away from self and so very close to Thee that I cannot help but grow into something of Thy likeness!

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