

Growth in Grace

“Grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.” - 2 Peter iii. 18.

The subject of the text which heads this page is one which I dare not omit in this volume about Holiness. It is one that ought to be deeply interesting to every true Christian. It naturally raises the questions, Do we grow in grace? Do we get on in our religion? Do we make progress?

To a mere formal Christian I cannot expect the inquiry to seem worth attention. The man who has nothing more than a kind of Sunday religion - whose Christianity is like his Sunday clothes, put on once a week, and then laid aside - such a man cannot, of course, be expected to care about “growth in grace.” He knows nothing about such matters. “They are foolishness to him.” (1 Cor. ii. 14.) But to every one who is in downright earnest about his soul, and hungers and thirsts after spiritual life, the question ought to come home with searching power. Do we make progress in our religion? Do we grow?

The question is one that is always useful, but especially so at certain seasons. A Saturday night, a Communion Sunday, the return of a birthday, the end of a year - all these are seasons that ought to set us thinking, and make us look within. Time is fast flying. Life is fast ebbing away. The hour is daily drawing nearer when the reality of our Christianity will be tested, and it will be seen whether we have built on “the rock” or on “the sand.” Surely it becomes us from time to time to examine ourselves, and take account of our souls? Do we get on in spiritual things? Do we grow?

The question is one that is of special importance in the present day. Crude and strange opinions are floating in men’s minds on some points of doctrine, and among others on the point of “growth in grace,” as an essential part of true holiness. By some it is totally denied. By others it is explained away, and pared down to nothing. By thousands it is misunderstood, and consequently neglected. In a day like this it is useful to look fairly in the face the whole subject of Christian growth.

In considering this subject there are three things which I wish to bring forward and establish: -

- I. The reality of religious growth. There is such a thing as “growth in grace.”
- II. The marks of religious growth. There are marks by which “growth in grace” may be known.
- III. The means of religious growth. There are means that must be used by those who desire “growth in grace.”

I know not who you are, into whose hands this paper may have fallen. But I am not ashamed to ask your best attention to its contents. Believe me, the subject is no mere matter of speculation and controversy. It is an eminently practical subject, if any is in religion. It is intimately and inseparably connected with the whole question of “sanctification.” It is a leading mark of true saints that they grow. The spiritual health and prosperity, the spiritual happiness and comfort of every true-hearted and holy Christian, are intimately connected with the subject of spiritual growth.

I. The first point I propose to establish is this: There is such a thing as growth in grace.

That any Christian should deny this proposition is at first sight a strange and melancholy thing. But it is fair to remember that man’s understanding is fallen no less than his will. Disagreements about doctrines are often nothing more than disagreements about the meaning of words. I try to hope that it is so in the present case. I try to believe that when I speak of “growth in grace” and maintain it, I mean one thing, while my brethren who deny it mean quite another. Let me therefore clear the way by explaining what I mean.

When I speak of “growth in grace,” I do not for a moment mean that a believer’s interest in Christ can grow. I do not mean that he can grow in safety, acceptance with God, or security. I do not mean that he can ever be more justified, more pardoned, more forgiven, more at peace with God, than he is the first moment that he believes. I hold firmly that the justification of a believer is a finished, perfect, and complete work; and that the weakest saint, though he may not know and feel it, is as completely justified as the strongest. I hold firmly that our election, calling, and standing in Christ admit of no degrees, increase, or diminution. If any one dreams that by “growth in grace” I mean growth in justification he is utterly wide of the mark, and utterly mistaken about the whole point I am considering. I would go to the stake, God helping me, for the glorious truth, that in the matter of justification before

God every believer is "complete in Christ." (Col. ii. 10.) Nothing can be added to his justification from the moment he believes, and nothing taken away.

When I speak of "growth in grace" I only mean increase in the degree, size, strength, vigour, and power of the graces which the Holy Spirit plants in a believer's heart. I hold that every one of those graces admits of growth, progress, and increase. I hold that repentance, faith, hope, love, humility, zeal, courage, and the like, may be little or great, strong or weak, vigorous or feeble, and may vary greatly in the same man at different periods of his life. When I speak of a man "growing in grace," I mean simply this - that¹ his sense of sin is becoming deeper, his faith stronger, his hope brighter, his love more extensive, his spiritual-mindedness more marked. He feels more of the power of godliness in his own heart. He manifests more of it in his life. He is going on from strength to strength, from faith to faith, and from grace to grace. I leave it to others to describe such a man's condition by any words they please. For myself I think the truest and best account of him is this - he is "growing in grace."

One principal ground on which I build this doctrine of "growth in grace," is the plain language of Scripture. If words in the Bible mean anything, there is such a thing as "growth," and believers ought to be exhorted to "grow." - What says St. Paul? "Your faith groweth exceedingly." (2 Thess. i. 3) "We beseech you that ye increase more and more." (1 Thess. iv. 10.) "Increasing in the knowledge of God." (Col. i 10.) "Having hope, when your faith is increased." (2 Cor. x. 15.) "The Lord make you to increase in love." (1 Thess. iii. 12.) "That ye may grow up into Him in all things." (Eph. iv. 15.) "I pray that your love may abound more and more." (Phil. i. 9.) "We beseech you, as ye have received of us how ye ought to walk and to please God, so ye would abound more and more." (1 Thess. iv. 1.) - What says St. Peter? "Desire the sincere milk of the Word, that ye may grow thereby." (1 Pet. ii. 2.) "Grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ." (2 Pet. iii. 18.) I know not what others think of such texts. To me they seem to establish the doctrine for which I contend, and to be incapable of any other explanation. Growth in grace is taught in the Bible. I might stop here and say no more.

The other ground, however, on which I build the doctrine of "growth in grace," is the ground of fact and experience. I ask any honest reader of the New Testament whether he cannot see degrees of grace in the New Testament saints whose histories are recorded, as plainly as the sun at noon-day? - I ask him whether he cannot see in the very same persons as great a difference between their faith and knowledge at one time and at another, as between the same man's strength when he is an infant and when he is a grownup man? - I ask him whether the Scripture does not distinctly recognise this in the language it uses, when it speaks of "weak" faith and "strong" faith, and of Christians as "new-born babes," "little children," "young men," and "fathers" (1 Pet. ii. 2; John ii. 12-14.) I ask him, above all, whether his own observation of believers, now-a-days, does not bring him to the same conclusion? - What true Christian would not confess that there is as much difference between the degree of his own faith and knowledge when he was first converted, and his present attainments, as there is between a sapling and a full-grown tree? His graces are the same in principle; but they have grown. I know not how these facts strike others: to my eyes they seem to prove, most unanswerably, that "growth in grace" is a real thing.

I feel almost ashamed to dwell so long upon this part of my subject. In fact, if any man means to say that the faith, and hope, and knowledge, and holiness of a newly-converted person, are as strong as those of an old-established believer, and need no increase, it is waste of time to argue further. No doubt they are as real, but not so strong - as true, but not so vigorous - as much seeds of the Spirit's planting, but not yet so fruitful. And if any one asks how they are to become stronger, I say it must be by the same process by which all things having life increase - they must grow. And this is what I mean by "growth in grace."¹

Let us turn away from the things I have been discussing to a more practical view of the great subject before us. I want men to look at "growth in grace" as a thing of infinite importance to the soul. I believe, whatever others may think, that our best interests are concerned in a right view of the question - Do we grow?

¹ "True grace is progressive, of a spreading, growing nature. It is with grace as it is with light: first, there is the day-break; then it shines brighter to the full noon-day. The saints are not only compared to stars for their light, but to trees for their growth, (Isa. lxi. 3; Hos. xiv. 5.) A good Christian is not like Hezekiah's sun that went backwards, nor Joshua's sun that stood still, but is always advancing in holiness, and increasing with the increase of God." - Thomas Watson, Minister of St. Stephen's Walbrook, 1660. (Body of Divinity.)

(a) Let us know then that “growth in grace” is the best evidence of spiritual health and prosperity. In a child, or a flower, or a tree, we are all aware that when there is no growth there is something wrong. Healthy life in an animal or vegetable will always show itself by progress and increase. It is just the same with our souls. If they are progressing and doing well they will grow.²

(b) Let us know, furthermore, that “growth in grace” is one way to be happy in our religion. God has wisely linked together our comfort and our increase in holiness. He has graciously made it our interest to press on and aim high in our Christianity. There is a vast difference between the amount of sensible enjoyment which one believer has in his religion compared to another. But you may be sure that ordinarily the man who feels the most “joy and peace in believing,” and has the clearest witness of the Spirit in his heart, is the man who grows.

(c) Let us know, furthermore, that “growth in grace” is one secret of usefulness to others. Our influence on others for good depends greatly on what they see in us. The children of the world measure Christianity quite as much by their eyes as by their ears. The Christian who is always at a standstill, to all appearances the same man, with the same little faults, and weaknesses, and besetting sins, and petty infirmities, is seldom the Christian who does much good. The man who shakes and stirs minds, and sets the world thinking, is the believer who is continually improving and going forward. Men think there is life and reality when they see growth.³

(d) Let us know, furthermore, that “growth in grace” pleases God. It may seem a wonderful thing, no doubt, that anything done by such creatures as we are can give pleasure to the Most High God. But so it is. The Scripture speaks of walking so as to “please God.” The Scripture says there are sacrifices with which “God is well-pleased.” (1 Thess. iv. 1; Heb. xiii. 16.) The husbandman loves to see the plants on which he has bestowed labour flourishing and bearing fruit. It cannot but disappoint and grieve him to see them stunted and standing still. Now what does our Lord Himself say? “I am the true vine, and my Father is the husbandman.” - “Herein is my Father glorified, that ye bear much fruit; so shall ye be my disciples.” (John xv. 1, 8.) The Lord takes pleasure in all His people - but specially in those that grow.

(e) Let us know, above all, that “growth in grace” is not only a thing possible, but a thing for which believers are accountable. To tell an unconverted man, dead in sins, to “grow in grace” would doubtless be absurd. To tell a believer, who is quickened and alive to God, to grow, is only summoning him to a plain Scriptural duty. He has a new principle within him, and it is a solemn duty not to quench it. Neglect of growth robs him of privileges, grieves the Spirit, and makes the chariot wheels of his soul move heavily. Whose fault is it, I should like to know, if a believer does not grow in grace? The fault, I am sure, cannot be laid on God. He delights to “give more grace;” He “hath pleasure in the prosperity of His servants.” (James iv. 6; Psa. v. 27.) The fault, no doubt, is our own. We ourselves are to blame, and none else, if we do not grow.

II. The second point I propose to establish is this: There are marks by which growth in grace may be known.

Let me take it for granted that we do not question the reality of growth in grace and its vast importance. - So far so good. But you now want to know how any one may find out whether he is growing in grace or not? I answer that question, in the first place, by observing that we are very poor judges of our own condition, and that bystanders often know us better than we know ourselves. But I answer further, that there are undoubtedly certain great marks and signs of growth in grace, and that wherever you see these marks you see a “growing” soul. I will now proceed to place some of these marks before you in order.

(a) One mark of “growth in grace” is increased humility. The man whose soul is “growing,” feels his own

² “The growth of grace is the best evidence of the truth of grace. Things that have not life will not grow. A picture will not grow. A stake in a hedge will not grow. But a plant that hath vegetative life will grow. The growing of grace shows it to be alive in the soul.” - T. Watson, 1660.

³ “Christian, as ever you would stir up others to exalt the God of grace, look to the exercise and improvement of your own graces. When poor servants live in a family, and see the faith, and love, and wisdom, and patience, and humility of a master, shining like the stars in heaven, it draws forth their hearts to bless the Lord that ever they came into such a family. - When men’s graces shine as Moses’ face did, when their life, as one speaketh of Joseph’s life, is a very heaven, sparkling with virtues as so many bright stars, how much others are stirred up to glorify God, and cry, ‘These are Christians indeed! these are an honour to their God, a crown to their Christ, and a credit to their Gospel! Oh, if they were all such, we would be Christians too!’ - T. Brooks, 1661. (Unsearchable Riches.)

sinfulness and unworthiness more every year. He is ready to say with Job, "I am vile," - and with Abraham, I am "dust and ashes," - and with Jacob, "I am not worthy of the least of all Thy mercies, - and with David, "I am a worm," - and with Isaiah, "I am a man of unclean lips," - and with Peter, "I am a sinful man, O Lord." Job xl. 4; Gen. xviii. 27;

ii. 10; Ps. xxii. 6; Isa. vi. 5; Luke v. 8.) The nearer he draws to God, and the more he sees of God's holiness and perfection, the more thoroughly is he sensible of his own countless imperfections. The further he journeys in the way to heaven, the more he understands what St. Paul means when he says, "I am not already perfect," - "I am not meet to be called an Apostle," - "I am less than the least of all saints," - "I am chief of sinners." (Phil. iii. 12; 1 Cor. xv. 9; Ephes. iii. 8; 1 Tim. i. 15.) The riper he is for glory, the more, like the ripe corn, he hangs down his head. The brighter and clearer is his light, the more he sees of the shortcomings and infirmities of his own heart. When first converted, he would tell you he saw but little of them compared to what he sees now. Would anyone know whether he is growing in grace? Be sure that you look within for increased humility.⁴

(b) Another mark of "growth in grace" is increased faith and love towards our Lord Jesus Christ. The man whose soul is "growing," finds more in Christ to rest upon every year, and rejoices more that he has such a Saviour. No doubt he saw much in Him when first he believed. His faith laid hold on the atonement of Christ and gave him hope. - But as he grows in grace he sees a thousand things in Christ of which at first he never dreamed. His love and power - His heart and His intentions - His offices as Substitute, Intercessor, Priest, Advocate, Physician, Shepherd, and Friend, unfold themselves to a growing soul in an unspeakable manner. In short, he discovers a suitableness in Christ to the wants of his soul, of which the half was once not known to him. Would anyone know if he is growing in grace? Then let him look within for increased knowledge of Christ.

(c) Another mark of "growth in grace" is increased holiness of life and conversation. The man whose soul is "growing" gets more dominion over sin, the world, and the devil every year. He becomes more careful about his temper, his words, and his actions. He is more watchful over his conduct in every relation of life. He strives more to be conformed to the image of Christ in all things, and to follow Him as his example, as well as to trust in Him as his Saviour. He is not content with old attainments and former grace. He forgets the things that are behind and reaches forth unto those things which are before, making "Higher!" "Upward!" "Forward!" "Onward!" his continual motto. (Phil. iii. 13.) On earth he thirsts and longs to have a will more entirely in unison with God's will. In heaven the chief thing that he looks for, next to the presence of Christ, is complete separation from all sin. Would anyone know if he is growing in grace? Then let him look within for increased holiness.⁵

(d) Another mark of "growth in grace" is increased spirituality of taste and mind. The man whose soul is "growing" takes more interest in spiritual things every year. He does not neglect his duty in the world. He discharges faithfully, diligently, and conscientiously every relation of life, whether at home or abroad. But the things he loves best are spiritual things. The ways, and fashions, and amusements, and recreations of the world have a continually decreasing place in his heart. He does not condemn them as down right sinful, nor say that those who have anything to do with them are going to hell. He only feels that they have a constantly diminishing hold on his own affections, and gradually seem smaller and more trifling in his eyes. Spiritual companions, spiritual occupations, spiritual conversation, appear of ever-increasing value to him. Would anyone know if he is growing in grace? Then let him look within for increasing spirituality of taste.⁶

4 "The right manner of growth is to grow less in one's own eyes. 'I am a worm and no man.' (Psa. xxii. 6.) The sight of corruption and ignorance makes a Christian grow into a dislike of himself. He doth vanish in his own eyes. Job abhorred himself in the dust. (Job xlii. 6.) This is good, to grow out of conceit with oneself." - T. Watson. 1660.

5 "It is a sign of not growing in grace, when we are less troubled about sin. Time was when the least sin did grieve us (as the least hair makes the eye weep), but now we can digest sin without remorse. Time was when a Christian was troubled if he neglected closet prayer; now he can omit family prayer. Time was when vain thoughts did not trouble him; now he is not troubled for loose practices. There is a sad declension in religion; and grace is so far from growing that we can hardly perceive its puke to beat." - T. Watson. 1660.

6 "If now you would be rich in graces, look to your walking. It is not the knowing soul, nor the talking soul, but the close-walking soul, the obedient soul, that is rich. Others may be rich in notions, but none so rich in spiritual experience, and in all holy and heavenly graces, as close-walking Christians." - T. Brooks. 1661. "It is a sign of not growing in grace, when we grow more worldly.

(e) Another mark of "growth in grace" is increase of charity. The man whose soul is "growing" is more full of love every year - of love to all men, but especially of love towards the brethren. His love will show itself actively in a growing disposition to do kindnesses, to take trouble for others, to be good-natured to everybody, to be generous, sympathizing, thoughtful, tender-hearted, and considerate. It will show itself passively in a growing disposition to be meek and patient toward all men, to put up with provocation and not stand upon rights, to bear and forbear much rather than quarrel. A growing soul will try to put the best construction on other people's conduct, and to believe all things and hope all things, even to the end. There is no surer mark of backsliding and falling off in grace than an increasing disposition to find fault, pick holes, and see weak points in others. Would any one know if he is growing in grace? Then let him look within for increasing charity.

(f) One more mark of "growth in grace" is increased zeal and diligence in trying to do good to souls. The man who is really "growing" will take greater interest in the salvation of sinners every year. Missions at home and abroad, efforts to increase religious light and diminish religious darkness - all these things will every year have a greater place in his attention. He will not become "weary in well-doing" because he does not see every effort succeed. He will not care less for the progress of Christ's cause on earth as he grows older, though he will learn to expect less. He will just work on, whatever the result may be - giving, praying, preaching, speaking, visiting, according to his position - and count his work its own reward. One of the surest marks of spiritual decline is a decreased interest about the souls of others and the growth of Christ's kingdom. Would any one know whether he is growing in grace? Then let him look within for increased concern about the salvation of souls.

Such are the most trustworthy marks of growth in grace. Let us examine them carefully, and consider what we know about them. I can well believe that they will not please some professing Christians in the present day. Those high-flying religionists, whose only notion of Christianity is that of a state of perpetual joy and ecstasy - who tell you that they have got far beyond the region of conflict and soul-humiliation - such persons no doubt will regard the marks I have laid down as "legal," "carnal," and "gendering to bondage." I cannot help that. I call no man master in these things. I only wish my statements to be tried in the balance of Scripture. And I firmly believe that what I have said is not only Scriptural, but agreeable to the experience of the most eminent saints in every age. Show me a man in whom the six marks I have mentioned can be found. He is the man who can give a satisfactory answer to the question, DO WE GROW?

III. The third and last thing I propose to consider is this: - The means that must be used by those who desire to grow in grace. The words of St. James must never be forgotten: "Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and cometh down from the Father of lights." (James i. 17.) This is no doubt as true of growth in grace as it is of everything else. It is the "gift of God." But still it must always be kept in mind that God is pleased to work by means. God has ordained means as well as ends. He that would grow in grace must use the means of growth.⁷

This is a point, I fear, which is too much overlooked by believers. Many admire growth in grace in others, and wish that they themselves were like them. But they seem to suppose that those who grow are what they are by some special gift or grant from God, and that as this gift is not bestowed on themselves they must be content to sit still. This is a grievous delusion, and one against which I desire to testify with all my might. I wish it to be distinctly understood that growth in grace is bound up with the use of means within the reach of all believers, and that, as a general rule, growing souls are what they are because they use these means.

Perhaps once we were mounted into higher orbits, we did set our hearts on things above, and speak the language of Canaan. But now our minds are taken off heaven, we dig our comforts out of these lower mines, and with Satan compass the earth. It is a sign we are going down hill apace, and our grace is in a consumption. It is observable when nature decays, and people are near dying, they grow more stooping. And truly when men's hearts grow more stooping to the earth, and they can hardly lift up themselves to an heavenly thought, if grace be not dead, yet it is ready to die." - T. Watson. 1660.

⁷ "Experience will tell every Christian that the more strictly, and closely, and constantly he walketh with God, the stronger he groweth in duty. Infused habits are advantaged by exercise. As the fire that kindled the wood for sacrifices upon the altar first came down from heaven, but then was to be kept alive by the care and labour of the priests, so the habits of spiritual grace are indeed infused from God, and must be maintained by daily influences from God, yet with a concurrence also of our own labours, in waiting upon God, and exercising ourselves with godliness; and the more a Christian doth so exercise himself, the more strong he shall grow." - Collinges on Providence. 1678.

Let me ask the special attention of my readers while I try to set forth in order the means of growth. Cast away for ever the vain thought that if a believer does not grow in grace it is not his fault. Settle it in your mind that a believer, a man quickened by the Spirit, is not a mere dead creature, but a being of mighty capacities and responsibilities. Let the words of Solomon sink down into your heart: "The soul of the diligent shall be made fat." (Prov. xiii. 4.)

(a) One thing essential to growth in grace is diligence in the use of private means of grace. By these I understand such means as a man must use by himself alone, and no one can use for him. I include under this head private prayer, private reading of the Scriptures, and private meditation and self-examination. The man who does not take pains about these three things must never expect to grow. Here are the roots of true Christianity. Wrong here, a man is wrong all the way through! Here is the whole reason why many professing Christians never seem to get on. They are careless and slovenly about their private prayers. They read their Bibles but little, and with very little heartiness of spirit. They give themselves no time for self-inquiry and quiet thought about the state of their souls.

It is useless to conceal from ourselves that the age we live in is full of peculiar dangers. It is an age of great activity, and of much hurry, bustle, and excitement in religion. Many are "running to and fro," no doubt, and "knowledge is increased." (Dan. xii. 4.) Thousands are ready enough for public meetings, sermon-hearing, or anything else in which there is "sensation." Few appear to remember the absolute necessity of making time to "commune with our hearts, and be still." (Psalm iv. 4.) But without this there is seldom any deep spiritual prosperity. I suspect that English Christians two hundred years ago read their Bibles more, and were more frequently alone with God, than they are in the present day. Let us remember this point! Private religion must receive our first attention, if we wish our souls to grow.

(b) Another thing which is essential to growth in grace is carefulness in the use of public means of grace. By these I understand such means as a man has within his reach as a member of Christ's visible Church. Under this head I include the ordinances of regular Sunday worship, the uniting with God's people in common prayer and praise, the preaching of the Word, and the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper. I firmly believe that the manner in which these public means of grace are used has much to say to the prosperity of a believer's soul. It is easy to use them in a cold and heartless way. The very familiarity of them is apt to make us careless. The regular return of the same voice, and the same kind of words, and the same ceremonies, is likely to make us sleepy, and callous, and unfeeling. Here is a snare into which too many professing Christians fall. If we would grow we must be on our guard here. Here is a matter in which the Spirit is often grieved and saints take great damage. Let us strive to use the old prayers, and sing the old hymns, and kneel at the old communion-rail, and hear the old truths preached, with as much freshness and appetite as in the year we first believed. It is a sign of bad health when a person loses relish for his food; and it is a sign of spiritual decline when we lose our appetite for means of grace. Whatever we do about public means, let us always do it "with our might." (Eccles. ix. 10.) This is the way to grow!

(c) Another thing essential to growth in grace is watchfulness over our conduct in the little matters of everyday life. Our tempers, our tongues, the discharge of our several relations of life, our employment of time - each and all must be vigilantly attended to if we wish our souls to prosper. Life is made up of days, and days of hours, and the little things of every hour are never so little as to be beneath the care of a Christian. When a tree begins to decay at root or heart, the mischief is first seen at the extreme end of the little branches. "He that despiseth little things," says an uninspired writer, "shall fall by little and little." That witness is true. Let others despise us, if they like, and call us precise and over-careful. Let us patiently hold on our way, remembering that "we serve a precise God," that our Lord's example is to be copied in the least things as well as the greatest, and that we must "take up our cross daily" and hourly, rather than sin. We must aim to have a Christianity which, like the sap of a tree, runs through every twig and leaf of our character, and sanctifies all. This is one way to grow!

(d) Another thing which is essential to growth in grace is caution about the company we keep and the friendships we form. Nothing perhaps affects a man's character more than the company he keeps. We catch the ways and tone of those we live and talk with, and unhappily get harm far more easily than good. Disease is infectious, but health is not. Now if a professing Christian deliberately chooses to be intimate with those who are not friends of God and who cling to the world, his soul is sure to take harm. It is hard enough to serve Christ under any circumstances in such a world as this. But it is doubly hard to

do it if we are friends of the thoughtless and ungodly. Mistakes in friendship or marriage-engagements are the whole reason why some have entirely ceased to grow. "Evil communications corrupt good manners." "The friendship of the world is enmity with God." (1 Cor. xv. 33; James iv. 4.) Let us seek friends that will stir us up about our prayers, our Bible-reading, and our employment of time - about our souls, our salvation, and a world to come. Who can tell the good that a friend's word in season may do, or the harm that it may stop? This is one way to grow.⁸

(e) There is one more thing which is absolutely essential to growth in grace - and that is regular and habitual communion with the Lord Jesus. In saying this, let no one suppose for a minute that I am referring to the Lord's Supper. I mean nothing of the kind. I mean that daily habit of intercourse between the believer and his Saviour, which can only be carried on by faith, prayer, and meditation. It is a habit, I fear, of which many believers know little. A man may be a believer and have his feet on the rock, and yet live far below his privileges. It is possible to have "union" with Christ, and yet to have little if any "communion" with Him. But, for all that, there is such a thing.

The names and offices of Christ, as laid down in Scripture, appear to me to show unmistakably that this "communion" between the saint and his Saviour is not a mere fancy, but a real true thing. Between the "Bridegroom" and his bride - between the "Head" and His members - between the "Physician" and His patients - between the "Advocate" and His clients - between the "Shepherd" and His sheep - between the "Master" and His scholars - there is evidently implied a habit of familiar intercourse, of daily application for things needed, of daily pouring out and unburdening our hearts and minds. Such a habit of dealing with Christ is clearly something more than a vague general trust in the work that Christ did for sinners. It is getting close to Him, and laying hold on Him with confidence, as a loving, personal Friend. This is what I mean by communion.

Now I believe that no man will ever grow in grace who does not know something experimentally of the habit of "communion." We must not be content with a general orthodox knowledge that justification is by faith and not by works, and that we put our trust in Christ. We must go further than this. We must seek to have personal intimacy with the Lord Jesus, and to deal with Him as a man deals with a loving friend. We must realize what it is to turn to Him first in every need, to talk to Him about every difficulty, to consult Him about every step, to spread before Him all our sorrows, to get Him to share in all our joys, to do all as in His sight, and to go through every day leaning on and looking to Him. This is the way that St. Paul lived: "The life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God." "To me to live is Christ." (Gal. ii. 20; Phil. i. 21.) It is ignorance of this way of living that makes so many see no beauty in the book of Canticles. But it is the man who lives in this way, who keeps up constant communion with Christ - this is the man, I say emphatically, whose soul will grow.

I leave the subject of growth in grace here. Far more might be said about it, if time permitted. But I have said enough, I hope, to convince my readers that the subject is one of vast importance. - Let me wind up all with some practical applications.

(1) This book may fall into the hands of some who know nothing whatever about growth in grace. They have little or no concern about religion. A little proper Sunday church-going or chapel-going makes up the sum and substance of their Christianity. They are without spiritual life, and of course they cannot at present grow. Are you one of these people? If you are, you are in a pitiable condition.

Years are slipping away and time is flying. Graveyards are filling up and families are thinning. Death and judgment are getting nearer to us all. And yet you live like one asleep about your soul! What madness! What folly! What suicide can be worse than this?

Awake before it be too late; awake, and arise from the dead, and live to God. Turn to Him who is sitting at the right hand of God, to be your Saviour and Friend. Turn to Christ, and cry mightily to Him about your soul. There is yet hope! He that called Lazarus from the grave is not changed. He that commanded the widow's son at Nain to arise from his bier can do miracles yet for your soul. Seek Him at once: seek Christ, if you would not be lost for ever. Do not stand still talking, and meaning, and intending, and

⁸ "Let them be thy choicest companions, that have made Christ their chiefest companion. Do not so much eye the outsides of men as their inside: look most to their internal worth. Many persons have their eyes upon the external garb of a professor. But give me a Christian that minds the internal worth of persons, that makes such as are most filled with the fulness of God his choicest and chiefest companions." - T. Brooks. 1661.

wishing, and hoping. Seek Christ that you may live, and that living you may grow.

(2) This book may fall into the hands of some who ought to know something of growth in grace, but at present know nothing at all. They have made little or no progress since they were first converted. They seem to have “settled on their lees.” (Zep. i. 12.) They go on from year to year content with old grace, old experience, old knowledge, old faith, old measure of attainment, old religious expressions, old set phrases. Like the Gibeonites, their bread is always mouldy, and their shoes are patched and clouted. They never appear to get on. Are you one of these people? If you are, you are living far below your privileges and responsibilities. It is high time to examine yourself.

If you have reason to hope that you are a true believer and yet do not grow in grace, there must be a fault, and a serious fault somewhere. It cannot be the will of God that your soul should stand still. “He giveth more grace.” He “takes pleasure in the prosperity of His servants.” (James iv. 6; Ps. v. 27.) It cannot be for your own happiness or usefulness that your soul should stand still. Without growth you will never rejoice in the Lord. (Phil. iv. 4.) Without growth you will never do good to others. Surely this want of growth is a serious matter! It should raise in you great searchings of heart. There must be some “secret thing.” (Job xv. 11.) There must be some cause.

Take the advice I give you. Resolve this very day that you will find out the reason of your standstill condition. Probe with a faithful and firm hand every corner of your soul. Search from one end of the camp to the other, till you find out the Achan who is weakening your hands. Begin with an application to the Lord Jesus Christ, the great Physician of souls, and ask Him to heal the secret ailment within you, whatever it may be. Begin as if you had never applied to Him before, and ask for grace to cut off the right hand and pluck out the right eye. But never, never be content, if your soul does not grow. For your peace sake, for your usefulness sake, for the honour of your Maker’s cause, resolve to find out the reason why.

(3) This book may fall into the hands of some who are really growing in grace, but are not aware of it, and will not allow it. Their very growth is the reason why they do not see their growth! Their continual increase in humility prevents them feeling that they get on.⁹ Like Moses, when he came down from the mount from communing with God, their faces shine. And yet, like Moses, they are not aware of it. (Ex. iv. 29.) Such Christians, I grant freely, are not common. But here and there such are to be found. Like angels’ visits, they are few and far between. Happy is the neighbourhood where such growing Christians live! To meet them and see them and be in their company, is like meeting and seeing a bit of “heaven upon earth.”

Now what shall I say to such people? What can I say? What ought I to say? Shall I bid them awake to a consciousness of their growth and be pleased with it? I will do nothing of the kind. - Shall I tell them to plume themselves on their own attainments, and look at their own superiority to others? God forbid! I will do nothing of the kind. - To tell them such things would do them no good. To tell them such things, above all, would be useless waste of time. If there is any one feature about a growing soul which

⁹ “Christians may be growing when they think they do not grow.” ‘There is that maketh himself poor, yet he is rich.’ (Prov. xiii. 7.) The sight that Christians have of their defects in grace, and their thirst after greater measures of grace, makes them think they do not grow. He who covets a great estate, because he hath not so much as he desires thinks himself poor.” - T. Watson. 1660. “Souls may be rich in grace, and yet not know it, not perceive it. The child is heir to a crown or a great estate, but knows it not. Moses’ face did shine, and others saw it, but he perceived it not. So many a precious soul is rich in grace, and others see it, and know it, and bless God for it, and yet the poor soul perceives it not. - Sometimes this arises from the soul’s strong desires of spiritual riches. The strength of the soul’s desires after spiritual riches doth often take away the very sense of growing spiritually rich. Many covetous men’s desires are so strongly carried forth after earthly riches, that though they do grow rich, yet they cannot perceive it, they cannot believe it. It is just so with many a precious Christian: his desires after spiritual riches are so strong, that they take away the very sense of his growing rich in spirituals. Many Christians have much worth within them, but they see it not. It was a good man that said, ‘The Lord was in this place and I knew it not.’ - Again, this ariseth sometimes from men neglecting to cast up their accounts. Many men thrive and grow rich, and yet, by neglecting to cast up their accounts, they cannot tell whether they go forward or backward. It is so with many precious souls. Again, this ariseth sometimes from the soul’s too frequent casting up of its accounts. If a man should cast up his accounts once a week, or once a month, he may not be able to discern that he doth grow rich, and yet he may grow rich. But let him compare one year with another, and he shall clearly see that he doth grow rich. - Again, this sometimes ariseth from the soul’s mistakes in casting up its accounts. The soul many times mistakes: it is in a hurry, and then it puts down ten for a hundred, and a hundred for a thousand. Look, as hypocrites put down their counters for gold, their pence for pounds, and always prize themselves above the market, so sincere souls do often put down their pounds for pence, their thousands for hundreds, and still prize themselves below the market.” - Thomas Brooks. 1661. (Unsearchable Riches)

specially marks him, it is his deep sense of his own unworthiness. He never sees anything to be praised in himself. He only feels that he is an unprofitable servant and the chief of sinners. It is the righteous, in the picture of the judgment-day, who say, "Lord, when saw we Thee an hungred, and fed Thee?" (Matt. xxv. 37.) Extremes do indeed meet strangely sometimes. The conscience-hardened sinner and the eminent saint are in one respect singularly alike. Neither of them fully realizes his own condition. The one does not see his own sin, nor the other his own grace!

But shall I say nothing to growing Christians? Is there no word of counsel I can address to them? The sum and substance of all that I can say is to be found in two sentences: "Go forward!" "Go on!"

We can never have too much humility, too much faith in Christ, too much holiness, too much spirituality of mind, too much charity, too much zeal in doing good to others. Then let us be continually forgetting the things behind, and reaching forth unto the things before. (Phil. iii. 13.) The best of Christians in these matters is infinitely below the perfect pattern of his Lord. Whatever the world may please to say, we may be sure there is no danger of any of us becoming "too good."

Let us cast to the winds as idle talk the common notion that it is possible to be "extreme" and go "too far" in religion. This is a favourite He of the devil, and one which he circulates with vast industry. No doubt there are enthusiasts and fanatics to be found who bring evil report upon Christianity by their extravagances and follies. But if any one means to say that a mortal man can be too humble, too charitable, too holy, or too diligent in doing good, he must either be an infidel or a fool. In serving pleasure and money it is easy to go too far. But in following the things which make up true religion, and in serving Christ there can be no extreme.

Let us never measure our religion by that of others, and think we are doing enough if we have gone beyond our neighbours. This is another snare of the devil. Let us mind our own business. "What is that to thee?" said our Master on a certain occasion: "Follow thou Me." (John xxi. 22.) Let us follow on, aiming at nothing short of perfection. Let us follow on, making Christ's life and character our only pattern and example. Let us follow on, remembering daily that at our best we are miserable sinners. Let us follow on, and never forget that it signifies nothing whether we are better than others or not. At our very best we are far worse than we ought to be. There will always be room for improvement in us. We shall be debtors to Christ's mercy and grace to the very last. Then let us leave off looking at others and comparing ourselves with others. We shall find enough to do if we look at our own hearts.

Last, but not least, if we know anything of growth in grace, and desire to know more, let us not be surprised if we have to go through much trial and affliction in this world. I firmly believe it is the experience of nearly all the most eminent saints. Like their blessed Master they have been "men of sorrows, acquainted with grief," and "perfected through sufferings." (Isa. liii. 3; Heb. ii. 10.) It is a striking saying of our Lord, "Every branch in Me that beareth fruit, my Father purgeth it, that it may bring forth more fruit." (John xv. 2.) It is a melancholy fact, that constant temporal prosperity, as a general rule, is injurious to a believer's soul. We cannot stand it. Sickness, and losses, and crosses, and anxieties, and disappointments seem absolutely needful to keep us humble, watchful, and spiritual-minded. They are as needful as the pruning knife to the vine, and the refiner's furnace to the gold. They are not pleasant to flesh and blood. We do not like them, and often do not see their meaning. "No chastening for the present seemeth to be joyous, but grievous: nevertheless, afterward, it yieldeth the peaceable fruit of righteousness." (Heb. xii. 11.) We shall find that all worked for our good when we reach heaven. Let these thoughts abide in our minds, if we love growth in grace. When days of darkness come upon us, let us not count it a strange thing. Rather let us remember that lessons are learned on such days which would never have been learned in sunshine. Let us say to ourselves, "This also is for my profit, that I may be a partaker of God's holiness. It is sent in love. I am in God's best school. Correction is instruction. This is meant to make me grow."

I leave the subject of growth in grace here. I trust I have said enough to set some readers thinking about it. All things are growing older: the world is growing old; we ourselves are grow-older. A few more summers, a few more winters, a few more sicknesses, a few more sorrows, a few more weddings, a few more funerals, a few more meetings, and a few more partings, and then - what? Why the grass will be growing over our graves!

Now would it not be well to look within, and put to our souls a simple question? In religion, in the things that concern our peace, in the great matter of personal holiness, are we getting on? DO WE GROW?