

Spiritual Maturity

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"...that we should no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, in the cunning craftiness by which they lie in wait to deceive, but speaking the truth in love, may grow up in all things into Him who is the head--Christ" (Eph. 4:14,15). "My little children, for whom I labor in birth again until Christ is formed in you..." (Gal. 4:19) "For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the first principles of the oracles of God; and you have come to need milk and not solid food. For everyone who partakes only of milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, for he is a babe. But solid food belongs to those who are of full age, that is, those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil" (Heb. 5:12-14).

The burden of God's heart is that each child of His come to a place of maturity. It is obvious that we must be born into God's kingdom before we can talk about maturity. But so many are willing to stay in the place of a babe, just rejoicing that they are born again. We can gain some insight if we consider the natural child. Before the birth, every thought and action has the birth day in view. The focus on that day is short-lived, however, for immediately after the child is born, attention is shifted to feeding and attending to the many needs that were not there before. If the child does not grow, joy is turned to sorrow very quickly. The whole thrust from birth onward is to bring this new child to a place of maturity. This process goes on for the next 20 years or so, and even then it does not stop. In comparison to what was involved to bring forth the birth, the labor unto maturity is far greater.

It is the same in our spiritual lives. There is no question that the good news of the Gospel must be proclaimed, and the work of the evangelist is necessary. God is always reaching out to "whosoever will" and we are all called to be witnesses unto God of what He has done in our lives. The miracle of new birth in Christ is a great wonder, and a new creation in Christ Jesus is always cause for great rejoicing by all. But we must never forget that a new babe in Christ is just that--a new babe. A baby is very vulnerable. There are many needs to be attended to if there is to be healthy growth. There will be no grounding and settling if growth does not take place. It is here that so many seem to fail.

What is Christian growth? What are we looking for in our own lives and in the lives of those for whom we are responsible? What is our part in our own growth? What is our part in the growth of others? These and other questions must be answered properly in the light of God's plan in Jesus Christ if we are to realize God's purpose in our lives. The following encouragement is directed to those who desire to grow up in Christ Jesus and take their full place in God's plan.

Adding To Our Faith

"But also for this very reason, giving all diligence, add to your faith virtue, to virtue knowledge, to knowledge self-control, to self-control perseverance, to perseverance godliness, to godliness brotherly kindness, and to brotherly kindness love. For if these things are yours and abound, you will be neither barren nor unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ" (II Peter 1:5-8). Peter goes on to say that "if you do these things you will never stumble."

When we first consider these things, they may strike us as rather uninteresting and too vague. Many today are looking for something else. Miracles, wonderful music, and great displays of spiritual gifts

seem much more attractive and exciting. We tend to measure spiritual maturity by these, but we have no scriptural basis for doing so. Paul said of the Corinthians that they "came behind in no spiritual gift," yet he spoke to them as "carnal" or fleshly--definitely not spiritual. He did not say that spiritual gifts were wrong; in fact, he encouraged their pursuit (I Cor. 14:1), but spiritual gifts are not a measure of spiritual maturity.

Cement foundations require hard work, and they are not the most visible part of the building, but in many ways they are the most essential. The areas Peter addresses are the foundations that must be laid in our lives if we are to stand the storms of life and finish the course set before us. God is deeply concerned with these foundations, and we must focus on them if we are to "grow in grace and the true knowledge" of our Lord Jesus. We are instructed to "give all diligence" in these things. Are we as diligent in these things as we are in other areas of our lives?

The phrase "add to your faith" that precedes the naming of specific areas is very critical. None of these virtues can be produced in our lives separate from a vital faith relationship with Jesus. It is imperative that we understand what this relationship is and how it works. Paul asked the Galatians how they received the Spirit and how the Spirit was supplied to them on a continual basis (Gal. 3:2-5). His answer was "by the hearing of faith." We are told that *"faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God"* (Rom. 10:17).

Peter lays the foundation for his exhortation by reminding his readers that God has given to us all things pertaining to life and godliness, and that we have been made partakers of the divine nature (II Peter 1:2-4). This is what happened at new birth. God came to abide within us, and in so doing made us a new creation in Christ Jesus. In the words of Paul, "faith has now come," or to say it another way, a union relationship with Christ by faith has now been made possible. By a miracle of God's grace, we now are a new creation, born of the Spirit. This union is realized and maintained, however, only as we move in response to the indwelling Spirit by faith.

The key to understanding and experiencing growth is knowing the reality of *"Christ in you, the hope of glory"* (Col. 1:27). God comes to abide within us in the person of the Holy Spirit. He is not outside, trying to get us to follow His example. He is on the inside, doing what we cannot do. We are not listening to voices coming to our natural ears, but responding to the indwelling Spirit who has come to make the things of Jesus ours.

This working is not automatic. Our part is first to believe that what God says about this relationship is true, and then to obey and move in union with His Spirit as He moves within us. If I doubt that I really am a new creation in Christ Jesus and able to obey God in all things, I question the character and grace of God and destroy the relationship. If I do not move when He moves, I manifest my lack of submission to His authority, and this also destroys the relationship. Jesus must be Lord in reality, not just in theory. This "faith relationship" must be realized in every area that Peter is addressing. In very simple words: we are living His life.

Virtue

Virtue is the first area that we are instructed to add in this relationship of faith. Virtue is moral excellence. God is holy, and we are commanded to be holy as He is holy. Holiness is purity--not being defiled by any uncleanness. God promises to be a Father to us if we will separate ourselves from this world and its filth (II Cor. 6:17,18). These areas are very obvious, and the Holy Spirit makes them clear to us immediately on coming to Christ. We are not even to touch the unclean thing. God always deals with uncleanness by separation, and we must do the same.

The commandment is this: *"Therefore, having these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God"* (II Cor. 7:1). Entertaining impure thoughts, allowing our desires to be stimulated by impurity, and treating these things with a casual attitude will immediately affect our relationship with God. We often think we can play with these things, the "filthiness of the flesh and spirit," and not get burned, but that is not true. God commands us to set our mind on things above (Col. 3:2) and on those things which are pure (Phil. 4:8). To do this means we must be concerned about what we read, what we look at in the media we are surrounded by, what we listen to, and the influences which we allow in our lives. We often think we can handle the mixture of these things, but God says "cleanse yourself" of that which is defiling.

We cannot be too radical in this area. It is too dangerous to see how close we can get to the edge without being burned. Coldness in our relationship with God can very often be traced to problems right here. Are we willing to be absolute with God? Are we willing to cut off that thing which is offending? How important is our relationship with God? Brothers and sisters, we must be "violent" about these things and not allow anything to defile our relationship with God. If we will, God will keep His promise and draw near to us, and be a Father to us. The choice is ours. Will we obey?

Knowledge

If we have obeyed God in adding virtue as He directs, we prepare ourselves to be able to learn the plan of God. God does not put a premium on ignorance. The natural mind cannot comprehend the things of God, but we have been brought into a relationship with Jesus, and He wants to teach us. This is where we need teachers who, by the ability of God, can lay a good foundation in our lives. God wants us to understand His plan and His ways. Here was Paul's direction to Timothy: *"But as for you, continue in the things which you have learned and been assured of, knowing from whom you have learned them, and that from childhood you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus"* (II Tim. 3:14,15).

The knowledge we are speaking about is not just an intellectual knowledge, but rather an understanding in life, in experience, of what God is doing and how He is doing it. God's method is men, men filled with the Holy Ghost who know what God is doing and who feed us with milk and solid food to bring us to a place of maturity. We need to "know such men" and then give them a proper place in our lives so that we can be grounded in truth. These men are those who meet the qualifications laid down in the scriptures, and are God's gifts to us for our building up.

There is an attitude in our day that says in effect: "I can make it on my own." This is a spirit of pride and self-sufficiency with which we must allow God to deal. I need the other members of the body of Christ and their input in my life under the direction of God. I need to recognize those whom God has brought into my life for this purpose. They do not take the place of the Holy Spirit, but the Holy Spirit works through these chosen vessels for our good and God's glory. God's plan is perfect, and we need to understand His plan and then submit to His working within His plan. This will bring us to a place of true understanding, in which we will be able to discern and not be tossed by everything that comes our way.

Self-Control

The teaching or knowledge that God brings into my life will be what is required to see my whole self brought under God's control. Jesus must be Lord in reality, not just in theory. Salvation is not primarily salvation from judgment, but salvation from myself. In reality, I am my biggest enemy. Most men destroy themselves by living for themselves. God wants us to live for Him. When I choose God and live for Him, He lifts me up and makes my whole earthly life a blaze of love and light, an expression of the very nature and character of His life. This cannot be done unless my whole self is brought under the control of God, which is not a small working! It includes my mind, my desires, my emotions, and the whole outward expression of my body.

Before you came to Christ, your whole person was exercised in sin. Now it must be exercised in righteousness. Colossians 3:1-15 gives us some direction in these things. The expressions of the old man (who I was in Adam) are to be put off, and the expression of the new man (who I am in Christ) are to be put on. This takes an active, determined response to the Holy Spirit. It is a whole-hearted response to the indwelling Christ, and it cuts across the old habits which are rooted in my person. In other words, God wants to *change me*.

This requires diligence--not self-effort, but diligence in my response to the leading of the Holy Spirit. Self-effort is trying to improve myself in the way that I think I should. This may produce some change in some areas, but it will be a struggle; there will not be a fragrance of God, and it very likely will not last because it does not deal with the root of things. Response to the Holy Spirit allows God to be the initiator. He always deals with the root of the matter, drawing upon His grace and His power to accomplish change, which leaves us in a place of rest and brings permanent results in our whole person that will bring glory to God.

Until my whole person can be directed by God in all things, I cannot realize God's purpose for my life. It cannot be overemphasized that this is a response to God in a relationship of faith, in which I am hearing God and drawing moment by moment on His grace. Self-effort is bondage, whereas God is changing *us* from glory to glory.

Perseverance

For the very character and nature of Christ to be formed in us, we must persevere in responding to the discipline of the Holy Spirit long enough for it to happen. Apart from this, our lives will never come to a place of stability. It is not that we can ever get to a place where we do not need the direction of the Holy Spirit--we must always have that. But our vessels of clay must be formed into the image of Christ. The Galatian believers were led astray by false teachers because they were not grounded in truth. To be grounded in truth is not only believing the right thing (we must do that), but being *exercised* in the truth so that Christ is formed in us. To say it another way, the Word (Christ) must become flesh in us. We must "eat" the Word (obey Christ) until it becomes part of us and we become living expressions of the Word. "*Unless you eat of my flesh and drink of my blood, you have no life in yourself*" (John 6:53). This is continually responding to Christ in a consistent manner over a period of time.

It is here that we so often fail. We get excited for a short time, and we do obey. But we do not respond for long enough to see a permanent change in our thinking or behavior, and we soon fall back into our old patterns of behavior. We flip back and forth again and again, driven by every wind of doctrine and circumstance of life until the day we face the big test, and because we have not allowed our lives to be disciplined, we fail the test and often never recover. God does not keep us from being tested; instead

He prepares us for the test. If we respond to God and allow our lives to be disciplined, we will go through the test and glorify God. It is in the fire that God is revealed and the witness of His reality goes forth to the world. The witness that God is looking for is the reality of Christ formed in our lives so that we can stand the test by the power of an endless life.

We see the same truth held before us in Romans 5:3-5: *"And not only that, but we also glory in tribulations, knowing that tribulation produces perseverance; and perseverance, character; and character, hope. 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."* If we do not persevere in the trials of our lives, responding to God, the character of God will not be built. Without the character of God being formed in us, we do not have a hope, because the trials of life will overthrow our faith. We may think we will stand, but if we do not respond to God in the small things of life, why do we think we will respond in the big things? We are being proven in our everyday lives. This is "the trial of our faith."

Are we concerned about this? Are we being diligent in adding perseverance to self-control? If we want to grow up in God so that we can stand in the day of adversity, we need to give utmost attention to this in our faith relationship with God.

Godliness

Godliness is God-likeness in every area of our life. The more obvious areas may be in outward expressions such as how we dress, how we talk, and how we conduct ourselves in this world. Our whole persons are to give forth an expression of the nature of God. Perseverance in responding to the discipline of the Holy Spirit will produce this God-likeness in our lives. There are many areas that God wants to lead us into, but He cannot until we establish certain foundational things. This is obvious when learning a natural discipline such as math or reading, but it is equally true in the Spirit. We will always be growing while we are here on this earth, but there must also be areas in which we are walking, almost without thought, that God has already established in our lives. *"Nevertheless, to the degree that we have already attained, let us walk by the same rule, let us be of the same mind"* (Phil. 3:15). Paul said he was pressing forward, reaching out to know Him, but this was on the basis that he was walking daily in what God had already established him in.

"Therefore, since all these things will be dissolved, what manner of persons ought you to be in holy conduct and godliness, looking for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be dissolved being on fire, and the elements will melt with fervent heat?" (II Peter 3:11,12) *"Therefore I desire that the men pray everywhere, lifting up holy hands, without wrath and doubting; in like manner also, that the women adorn themselves in modest apparel, with propriety and moderation, not with braided hair or gold or pearls or costly clothing, but, which is proper for women professing godliness, with good works"* (I Tim. 2:8-10). *"But reject profane and old wives' fables, and exercise yourself rather to godliness. For bodily exercise profits a little, but godliness is profitable for all things, having promise of the life that now is and of that which is to come"* (I Tim. 4:7,8).

Can we read these scriptures with a desire to walk in truth and begin to sense what godliness is? It is more than just moral excellence, which is obvious and must become part of our life in God immediately. But godliness embraces the whole character of God. We often hide behind the excuse "I don't see anything wrong with that" or "I don't know any scripture verse about that." If we have these attitudes, we will never enter into an expression of godliness, and the testimony of our lives will have very little value to God or to others. We will often find ourselves more a stumbling block to others than a stepping stone. We must allow the Holy Spirit to touch every area of our lives. He will not contradict

the scriptures, but He will take us far beyond a literal scripture verse. "Holy conduct" covers our entire lives--how we conduct ourselves in our thinking, attitudes, speech, dress, and actions. God is concerned about every detail of our lives.

The Holy Spirit is the only one who can communicate these areas to the one who is serious about his or her relationship with God. There is a soberness and an absoluteness about the character of God. God wants to express His character through us. Are we ready for Him to do so? More than that, are we experiencing it? If not, we need to begin to add godliness in our faith.

Brotherly Kindness

God-likeness forms the foundation for us to properly relate to our brothers and sisters. Apart from Christ being formed in us to bring God-like character, we will not be able to be built together properly with our brothers and sisters. The biggest problems seem to come in relationships one with another. This is because too often we try to have fellowship on a natural level instead of moving in a spiritual relationship.

To move in a spiritual relationship with my brothers and sisters, I first must have allowed God to discipline my life and bring me under His control. I must allow God to affect who I am, so that it is Christ and His character that is being expressed through my whole person. This will enable me to serve Christ to my brothers and sisters. This service may take many expressions, but they will all be to the upbuilding and edification of the saints.

"Let no corrupt communication proceed out of your mouth, but what is good for necessary edification, that it may impart grace to the hearers. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. Let all bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor, and evil speaking be put away from you, with all malice. And be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, just as God in Christ also forgave you" (Eph. 4:29-32). Notice the context of the phrase "do not grieve the Holy Spirit." It is in our relationships with each other. Paul tells us that we are now members of the Body of Christ. This is a real relationship in the Spirit. If we do not recognize this relationship with each other, and treat it lightly or with carelessness, we grieve the Holy Spirit and destroy spiritual fellowship. In this place we cannot move together, and our ability to express the character of God together ceases.

Notice that all of the previous virtues that Peter mentions relate primarily to us as individuals, but here we are speaking of something that involves all of my brothers and sisters. The other areas must be working in my life to be able to walk in brotherly kindness. The character of God is not primarily expressed through me as an individual, but through the Body of Christ as a whole. Each member must be alive unto God and be a fit living stone, but none of us can express God fully by ourselves. Together we are the Body of Christ, a full expression of the character and life of God, which takes nothing less than the divine power of God. Until we are beginning to walk in this expression of God together, we have hardly even begun to walk in the purpose of God for our lives. The whole working of God is to bring us together to move as one under Christ our Head, doing His will.

So much of what is called Christianity today does not even touch this. Men have created programs that allow us to stay separate. By so doing, we remain isolated, detached from one another, just a group of individuals instead of one body. Our movement has no power to affect others for God because we are moving alone, separate from God and from our brothers and sisters. Not only do we suffer a lack, but our brothers and sisters are affected because the supply that should be coming through each member is not present. Without a proper relationship with our brothers and sisters, we will not be able to speak the

truth in love one to another, and we will not grow up into God (Eph. 4:14-16). We are talking about growing up into God. The pathway is *together*--knit together in love. Have we begun? Are we continuing?

Love

The ultimate expression of the character of God in our lives is love. Paul said it was the greatest of all. God is never spoken of as "self-control" or "kindness," but we do have the statement that "God is love." Love is all-inclusive. Love is expressed first toward God, then toward our brothers and sisters, and finally toward a needy world.

When we think of love, what comes to our mind? A feeling? A general ideal? A goal that we never quite reach? Love is none of these. Listen to Paul: *"Love suffers long and is kind; love does not envy; love does not parade itself, is not puffed up; does not behave rudely, does not seek its own, is not provoked, thinks no evil; does not rejoice in iniquity, but rejoices in the truth; bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never fails"* (I Cor. 13:4-8). Notice that all of these are things we do. Love is God in action. God so loved that He gave Himself. When all of the other areas that Peter speaks about begin to work in our lives, they will bring us to this one point of giving of ourselves. Until we know what it means to give of ourselves, we do not yet know what love is. And until we grow up to the place where the whole expression of our lives is love, in the words of Paul, we are nothing more than sounding brass or a clanging cymbal. Love is so vast that it embraces everything that God is. Yet it is so practical that it affects the smallest detail of my life.

It cannot be overemphasized that we can only experience the fullness of God's love together. *"...That Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the width and length and depth and height--to know the love of Christ which passes knowledge; that you may be filled with all the fullness of God"* (Eph. 3:17-20). It is here that we seem to pull back so many times. If we want to enter into the purpose of God, we dare not pull back, but in faith we must give of ourselves to God and to one another. This means dropping the barriers and beginning to build spiritual relationships with each other. This takes time, effort, commitment, and most of all, God.

Diligence

If we want to enter into all God has prepared for us, then we must get more serious about this growing up. *"But also for this very reason, giving all diligence, add..."* We cannot be content just to rejoice that we are saved. Praise God that we are saved from sin if we really are, but that is not where we are to stay. That is just the beginning. God has much more for us. God wants us to grow up and enter into His purpose for us in Christ Jesus. That means a diligent, determined *adding* in our lives, of all of the above virtues. It means there must be progress and change. I must take on the mind of Christ in all things. I must experience God.

So many of us find ourselves just drifting. We are content to gather with the saints and sing a few songs. We have our quiet time. We read the scripture and listen to sermons. We talk about the Lord with our brothers and sisters. We talk to God about many things. We commend ourselves for believing the right things and seeing what is wrong in everybody else. But we are not being changed from glory to glory. We are not progressing in this walk of faith. We are not experiencing God, and worse than that, we are not overly concerned about it. Why not? Would we be concerned if our natural children were not growing? Why is spiritual growth not even more important to us?

Perhaps we are looking at the wrong things, or maybe we have the wrong goals. Has God spoken to us about certain areas in our lives and we have explained away His word to us? May God have mercy on us if we have, for we do not realize the coldness that is setting into our lives. The end of all things is at hand. We are not to be caught up in an emotional frenzy, or to worry, but we are to be diligent. Do we know what that means? God has so much more that He wants to lead us into, but these foundations must be laid in our lives for Him to be able to take us on into the fullness of His purpose. *"There remains therefore a rest for the people of God. For he who has entered His rest has himself also ceased from his works as God did from His. Let us therefore be diligent to enter that rest, lest anyone fall after the same example of disobedience"* (Heb. 4:9-11). Brethren, let us grow up! The time is short.