

Growing in Grace

by Ray C. Stedman

It has been our privilege to sit under the ministry of the Apostle John, the Mender, the one to whom it was given by our Lord to restate the foundations of the church. This is the ministry of the Apostle John, both in his gospel and in his letters. In this first letter his primary concern has been to restore to Christians, in every age and place, that intimacy with and restful confidence in the Lord Jesus Christ himself, which John calls fellowship. Remember Jesus himself had spoken of this. He said that if anyone came to him he would put in him “a well of living water” {cf, John 14:4 KJV} which would be “in him.” It would be impervious to circumstances, could not be touched by anything outside. He also spoke of “rivers of living water” that would flow from within {John 7:38}.

In another place he describes this relationship as “abiding in him.” He said without this, “you can do nothing” {John 15:5 RSV}, i.e., nothing significant, nothing worthwhile, nothing lasting. This has been John’s theme in this letter.

Paul calls this “the filling of the Spirit” {Eph 5:18, Gal 5:25} because it comes to us through the ministry of the Holy Spirit, but he is referring to the same thing. He also calls it “spirituality,” that relationship to the Spirit, by which the life of Christ is so continually imparted to us that he clothes himself with our personality and lives his life again in us. Paul also uses the same term John uses, *fellowship*.

Now such fellowship with Christ ought to be the supreme concern of every Christian, because from it all power, all effectiveness and all satisfaction with Christian faith comes. If you are not satisfied with your Christian life and do not feel you are experiencing all that the Word of God promises, you are faced with a problem in the area of fellowship. John has already made clear to us in this letter that it all begins with an act of relation-

ship which results from a moment of choice when we deliberately, willfully, open our lives to the Lord Jesus. We receive him, we accept Christ, we invite him to enter into our life. That results in a new union. God acts, he does something to us, in that moment of choice. We are united with him. As the gospel tells us, we are “translated out of the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of the Son of his love,” {cf, Col 1:13}. We are removed from the power of Satan, his hold on us is broken, and we are brought into the kingdom of Christ and of God. John has given us certain signs by which we can know whether this is true or not. And all this is to lead on to an experience of fellowship, an attitude of faith, a dependence on the life of God within us, an openness to the light of God that shines upon us, moment by moment, at work, at school, with our friends, or wherever we are.

Now John introduces us to a third factor which follows relationship and fellowship. He adds a word which we will find frequently on the pages of Scripture – *maturity, full growth*, or, as you find it in the King James Version, *perfection*. The curse of the church has always been immature Christians, Christians who never grow up, Christians who cease their progress soon after beginning the Christian life.

It reminds one of that familiar story of the little boy who fell out of bed. When his mother asked what happened, he said; “I don’t know, I guess I went to sleep too close to the place I got in.”

This has happened to many Christians. They have never grown up. The Christian life is much more than a beginning in conversion, it is what happens after that which is of supreme importance. Christians who have never grown up are always a problem and cause many difficulties. If you are a brand-new Christian, just come to know Jesus Christ, and still rejoicing in the thrill of new-found

relationship, I am not speaking to you. You are not a problem, particularly, for there is always room and provision for babies in a family circle. But Christians who are yet babies after ten, twenty, thirty, even forty years of Christian life, these are the problem. They are immature, they refuse to grow up.

John now comes face to face with this problem and in the text before us he describes three stages of spiritual development, three levels of growth in the Christian life:

I am writing to you, little children, because your sins are forgiven for his sake. I am writing to you, fathers, because you know him who is from the beginning. I am writing to you, young men, because you have overcome the evil one. {1 Jn 2:12-13a RSV}

There are three groups – children, fathers, young men. These have no relationship to physical age whatsoever, or to sex. It is possible for a man sixty years old in the flesh to be six months old in the Lord. It is possible for a woman to be a father in the sense used here, a mature, developed, full-grown Christian. A young man of thirty can be a babe in Christ, a father, or a young man according to the terms John uses here. These have no relationship to the time that you have been a Christian, the years since your conversion, or even to the position you may hold as a Christian.

A few weeks ago a friend and I were discussing a very prominent Christian leader, a man known throughout the West as a Bible teacher and leader. My friend was telling me of this man's reaction to a certain situation that had occurred, and his comment about him was this, "I never saw a more juvenile performance in my life!" What was the matter? Here is a man in a prominent Christian position who is still a babe, still immature, still a juvenile. He has not grown up yet.

Now let us look at these more closely. These successive stages of the Christian life (and, if you are a Christian, you belong in here somewhere) are introduced by the title, little children. John uses here a word in Greek which means "to be born." It is almost the exact equivalent of the Scottish word, *bairns*, born ones. He is referring to the fact that though they are young and immature, nevertheless, they are in the family. They have become part of the family of God. You cannot get into a family

without birth. That is true on the physical level, and it is true on the spiritual level. Jesus said to Nicodemus, "You must be born again," {cf, John 3:7}. As John Wesley went about England, everywhere he would preach on that text, "You must be born again." Someone said to him once. "Mr. Wesley, why do you so continually repeat that text, 'you must be born again'?" Mr. Wesley said, "Because, 'you must be born again.'" That is the one way into the family of God, birth, the receiving of Jesus Christ and the birth of the Spirit.

Now John immediately describes the experience of all Christians which follows this new birth. "Little children, I am writing to you because your sins are forgiven for his sake." That is the basic Christian position. It is forever true of all Christians that their sins are forgiven, and it is always the first thing they become aware of when they become Christians. There is the lifting of the load of guilt, the solving of the problem of destiny, the forgiveness of sins. What a wonderful experience it is.

Remember, in *Pilgrims Progress*, John Bunyan describes it as Christian is struggling through the Slough of Despond. He is so discouraged, with a great and heavy burden on his back. Then he sees a cross a long way off and, finally, coming up to it, he feels the burden roll off his back and he has a great sense of release and freedom. That is the experience of the forgiveness of sin.

It is often a time of tremendous emotional release. Some of us look back at it and remember well how our emotions were stirred by a wonderful sense of relief. God had laid upon Christ the burden of our sins and we were set free from the awful load of guilt that harassed us and hounded us.

I remember a lady, years ago in Denver, who became a Christian after a very worldly life. When she sensed the glory of the truth that her sins were forgiven, she wanted to say something that would express it, but she did not know what to say. She had yet to learn words like "Hallelujah," so she cried "Whoopee!"

There are many who feel a deep, sweet sense of peace. No wonder they sing "O happy day, that fixed my choice on Thee, my Savior and my God."

It has been over thirty-five years for me since I first experienced the joy of the forgiveness of sins, but I will never forget the great wonderful sense of the lifting of the load of guilt.

John does not mention here some of the negative aspects of spiritual infancy. He merely marks this one consistent, positive condition that is true of all who come to Christ – their sins are forgiven. He does not mention that, like physical babies, new Christians can often be rude and egotistical, emotionally unstable and overly dependent on other people. That is the way new babies are. They display many negative qualities, but the one thing that is universally true of them is that they are in the family, they have life.

I conducted an amateurish and unauthorized study of my youngest daughter when she was a baby and noted several things about baby personalities:

- I found, first, that she was very lazy. She did nothing but lie around the house all day, and contributed absolutely nothing to the household except to make a lot of trouble for everyone.
- And she was rude. She would burp right in your face and never apologize. She was utterly unconcerned about another's reaction or another's welfare.
- She was also highly uncooperative, oftentimes waking us up in the middle of the night for demands that could well have waited for morning.
- But there was one thing about her that kept me intensely interested in her: She knew her Daddy!

John says here, in the latter part of Verse 13, of these spiritual babes, "I write to you, children, because you know the Father."

But, you know, there was one thing I did not say about this little lassie. I did not say, "Look at her! Rude, uncooperative, lazy. If that's what a human being is, I don't want to be one." No, I realized that all she needed was growth. She needed to have her human life developed properly, trained. I knew that as she grew she would move into maturity. And that is what John is after here.

There must be a beginning in the Christian life, but it is only a beginning, it is not an ending. We are intended to move, to go on, to "grow in grace and the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ," as Peter said {cf, 2 Pet 3:18}. This is what all the

apostles aim for. Paul said, "Him (Christ) we proclaim, warning every man and teaching every man in all wisdom, that we may present every man mature in Christ," {Col 1:28 RSV}. Maturity, that is what he is after.

Now this is but a brief survey this morning. We shall spend more time with this passage because of its great importance to us.

John moves on to look at the other end of the growth process, the fully matured Christian, the fathers:

I am writing to you, fathers, because you know him who is from the beginning. {1 Jn 2:14a RSV}

That is the chief characteristic of one who could be called a father, "You know him who is from the beginning."

Who is that? Well, that refers to the word with which this epistle opens:

That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life – the life was manifest, and we saw it, ... {1 Jn 1:1-2a RSV}

In other words, this is Jesus Christ. The mark of a father, then, is one who has come to know Jesus Christ. The word "know" carries the implication, "coming to know by experience." A father is one who has come to know, by long experience, the Lord Jesus Christ.

There are two inescapable factors about that kind of knowledge. There is personal acquaintanceship; it must be intimate, close, and personal, and, it must be over a long period of time. No one can become a father, in this sense, overnight. There must be years spent in fellowship together. The inevitable result of that kind of activity is resemblance, a mutual identity that grows out of such personal acquaintance over a long period of time. You often see this on the physical level, do you not? If two people live together a long time, know each other well, and are communicating – talking back and forth – they grow to be like one another.

I shall never forget once riding with a couple who were celebrating their thirtieth wedding anniversary. My wife and I were going out to dinner with them, and we drove to a restaurant they had in

mind. When we got there we found it closed, and the man said to his wife, who was sitting in the seat behind him, “Oh, there’s that other restaurant, how about that?” And she said, “Yes! That would be exactly the place!” And without another word we drove right to it. There I realized how well two people can come to know each other when they live together.

Thus fathers are Christ-like. That is their chief characteristic. They possess in great measure the disposition of Jesus Christ. They have left behind the signs of immaturity. Remember Paul says, in that great love chapter of First Corinthians 13, “When I was a child I thought like a child, I spoke like a child, I reasoned like a child, but when I became a man I put away childish things,” {cf, 1 Cor 13:11}. That is maturity, to put away childish things. Fathers are no longer juvenile in their attitudes, no longer unstable, petty, flippant, but are steady, thoughtful, competent, easy to live with. We will see more of this as we come back to John’s second survey of these classifications, in a further message.

The third stage he indicates is that of young men:

I am writing to you, young men, because you have overcome the evil one. {1 Jn 2:13b RSV}

The indicative mark here is that a young man has overcome the evil one. This is the mark of those who are growing, who are strong, who are moving into maturity. They have overcome the evil one. What does that reveal?

- First it reveals that their eyes have been opened to the true nature of the struggle of life. As Paul put it in Ephesians 6, “We wrestle not against flesh and blood,” {Eph 6:12a KJV}. Our problem is not people. It is the immature Christian who says, “If so-and-so would just leave me alone – my boss, my mother-in-law, my daughter, my son, my husband, my wife, the Internal Revenue Department – if they would just leave me alone I would be fine. It’s people who are my problem.” But anyone who has learned to overcome the evil one knows differently. He knows we wrestle not against flesh and blood but against principalities and powers, against wicked spirits in high places,

against world rulers in this present darkness. The battle is in the mind, with ideas, with attitudes, with subtle and alluring temptations that come in hidden ways. Here is the true battle, and these young men have had their eyes opened to the struggle and have come to grips with these powerful invisible forces that wreak such havoc today.

- Furthermore, they have learned to live deliberately and consistently in fellowship with the Son of God, for that is the only way to overcome the evil one. You cannot do it by your own might. You cannot do it by your own intellectual power, you will be beaten every time if you try that as, consistently, men and women have been beaten for centuries by the wiles and the guile of the devil. How do you overcome? Well, as Paul puts it again in Ephesians, “be strong in the Lord and in the power of his might,” {Eph 6:10 KJV}. These young men have learned this. They have learned how to walk in the Spirit. They have learned to avoid the perils which John mentions earlier in this letter, the peril of ignoring light, of denying the possibility of sin, and of rationalizing their wrong-doing, giving it more appealing names. They have learned to walk in fellowship, walking in the Spirit.
- Yet they are not mature. They are spiritual, but they are not mature. They lack yet the full range of Christian experience.

There is great confusion in Christian circles at this point. There is a difference between spirituality and maturity. Maturity is the final goal. It is what the Spirit of God is aiming at, for you to be a grownup, mature, experienced Christian. Spirituality is the process by which you get there. Maturity is produced by time spent in fellowship, in spiritual relationship, to the Son of God. That is why you can live for years as a Christian and never mature, for the years are not spent in fellowship but in walking outside this relationship of fellowship with the Son of God.

See how this works on the physical level. You fathers here, suppose your little boy came to you, and said, “Daddy, I want to grow up to be big like you are. I want to be a man. I want to be as tall as

you are, and as big as you are, and as strong as you are. How do you do it?" What would you say? Would you say to your son, "Well, go and try hard to grow. Think about growth. Strain at it all the time. Chin yourself every morning when you get up, constantly be stretching and thinking about growth. Work at it. That's the way to grow." You would not say that. You would say, "Son, if you eat well, exercise, sleep, and keep healthy, you can't help but grow. Growth is automatic. You'll get there. Don't worry about growing, but give yourself to the conditions that make for growth and you'll get there."

Now apply that to the Christian life. It is equally true. The key to growth is fellowship with the Son of God, spiritual health. You want to be a mature Christian, able to take whatever comes, able to keep your head when all about you are losing theirs and blaming it on you? Then, give yourself to the conditions that make for health:

- Eat Christ, eat his Word, grow in the knowledge of him, think, talk, communicate with him.
- And sleep, i.e., rest in Christ. Learn how to rely on his strength, not yours, and live in constant expectation that he is working in you to do his good pleasure.
- And exercise! Serve him, obey him, move out, take on things to do, open your eyes and step out to meet the needs that call out all around you, the cries of suffering and anguished hearts, the lonely and discouraged.

- When you do, you will discover that you have overcome the evil one, he cannot get at you. And bit by bit you become like Christ, the most attractive, the most fascinating, the most compelling personality that ever lived.

Now we shall return to this, and see more of these stages of growth in detail later. This is but a brief survey. But this truth is so practical, so helpful, it introduces us in a very practical manner to the table of the Lord.

This is what our Lord had in mind when he instituted this Supper. He said, taking the bread, "This is my body which is broken for you," {cf, Luke 22:19 KJV}. What do you do with bread? Well, you eat it. And thus we are to eat Christ. Oh, not in this symbolic form only but we are to take him in and feast upon his strength, and, in this spiritual sense, live our life on the strength which he provides. That is what the Lord's Supper means.

Prayer:

Our Father, as we come to this table of the Lord we ask to understand more fully what is involved in this symbolism. This is no magic, no hocus-pocus, by which our spiritual lives will somehow be strengthened as we eat a piece of bread and drink a bit of grape juice. Rather, this is a symbol of what must be taking place in reality in our spirit and soul, if we are to really be what we claim to be. Teach us this, Lord. Tear away the veil that hides the truth from us. Make us see behind the symbol to the reality. May we grow in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray, Amen.