

WHEN CHRISTIANS GROW: PART I
2 PETER 1:8-11

Need: Christian growth

Proposition: Christian growth produces some very positive results in the Christian life.

Objective: To encourage Christians to do those things which produce spiritual growth.

Introduction:

Christians are supposed to grow. This was the burden carried by the earliest spiritual leaders in the Christian movement. Paul gave a pastoral rebuke to the Corinthians for continuing to be "babes in Christ." (I Corinthians 3.) The unknown writer of Hebrews indicates that some were still being fed milk when they should have been eating meat. He considered this to be a very serious condition. But it seems to have been a special burden to Peter. In his first letter he wrote, "As newborn babes desire the sincere milk that ye may grow thereby." This second letter opens with the extended word about growth, and then closes with the admonition, "But grow in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.¹

Are you a growing Christian? Is it obvious to those who know you that you are making progress in the things of God? Already we have considered how Christians grow. We discovered that growth is the normal outgrowth of the new birth. When you become a partaker of the divine nature, this new life should express itself increasingly in the life. But there certainly must be life before there can be growth. We also discovered that growth demands effort. We are under the apostolic admonition to "give all diligence" to this matter. We are responsible for adding to our faith the other qualities that enable us to grow toward a full Christ-like character. Everything to be added has as its ultimate end a life of love.

Peter, the wise pastor, does more than lay an admonition on us. He adds to the admonition some helpful warnings and encouragement. He puts before us in our text the fruit of spiritual growth. When you grow as a Christian there will be some very positive results in your life. Let's consider the first two of these this morning, and we will consider the other two tonight.

I. WHEN CHRISTIANS GROW, THEY ARE PRODUCTIVE IN SERVICE.

"For if these things be in you, and abound, they make you that you shall be neither barren nor unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ." What are "these things"? They are the things to be added to our faith. To paraphrase Peter, "If you are a growing Christian, you will be neither barren nor unfruitful." It is rather strong statement about this growth. He indicates that these things must be yours in a very special way, and that they must be ever increasing in your life. If you are not abounding or increasing in these things, then you can expect to be barren and unfruitful.

"In the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ" reminds us of the context of the Christian life. It is from our knowledge of the Lord Jesus that we draw all of the resources we need for the Christian life. He is the very sphere of the Christian life--from beginning to end.

This strong statement by Peter reminds us of the purpose of God for us. God is interested in more than just taking us to heaven. He has made us a partaker of the divine nature, and made available to us His abundant resources, that we might be fruitful in the world. "Barren" is a negative word that has a real heartache in it. The word is commonly associated with a woman who has been frustrated in her desire to conceive and bear children. You will remember that group of barren women whose story is told in the Old Testament. Beginning with Sarah onward they are presented as women who are bitter and unfulfilled. They are barren.

What is the emphasis of this reference? The emphasis is upon our being involved and effective in what God has put us in the world to do. God has a specific place of service He has designed for us. But only those Christians who grow ever know the joy of filling that designed place. Those who do not grow find themselves to be idle and unused. The root meaning of this word is "idle" or "useless." The greatest assignment the Lord has given to any of us is that of making other Christians. We are commissioned to "Make disciples." But so many of us are barren. When this church only baptizes about a hundred people per year, it is obvious that there are many "barren" Christians among us. Our impact is not very great on the world about us. It is directly related to so many Christians who have not grown. They have not been adding to their saving faith the other qualities. They are "barren."

The other word used by Peter is "unfruitful." While it is similar to the word for "barren," I believe there is a distinction to be made. The figure is that of a vine or a tree. Peter may have been recalling the word spoken for Jesus about each disciple being a branch in the Vine. In that great passage recorded by John, which Peter heard, Jesus emphasized the importance of fruit. God has ordained that His people bear fruit. In other instances Jesus announced a terrible judgment upon the nation of Israel, because of their failure to produce fruit.

Let me just point you to an obvious aspect of fruitfulness that you might miss. For whom does a tree bear fruit? For whom does the vine produce grapes? For itself? Obviously not. The only interest the tree or the vine has in bearing fruit is in bringing satisfaction to others. The tree produces fruit for its owner and for those who pass by. The "fruitful" Christian life is one that is bringing satisfaction to the Lord God, and meaningful service to others. The fruitful Christian is giving off blessings to all who pass by. We are designed by God to be a vine along the pathway of life. From us, as from a branch, the world should be able to pluck daily blessings. We are in the world to bless, not to be blessed.

But who are these Christians that bless others and bring joy to God? They are the ones who are growing. They are generously adding to their saving faith everything that is necessary to grow. They are allowing the Lord Jesus to increasingly be in them everything needed for growth. As they do, they are effective in the service of God and their fellowman. They are fruitful in the best sense of the word.

II. WHEN CHRISTIANS GROW, THEY ARE ASSURED OF SALVATION.

This is the second positive result of Christian growth. In the passage Peter approaches it with a sense of urgency and warning.

The matter of assurance has been a matter of some controversy among Christians. Some confident Christians have declared that assurance is automatic in the Christian life. They contend that an absence of assurance is a sure sign that a person is unsaved. Any doubt, according to them, is a sure sign of eternal perdition to come. But others have just as dogmatically denied that anyone can really be sure about their salvation. They confess that they "hope" to be saved in the end, but they are not sure. Both of these positions are in conflict with these words of Peter in this text. We need to base our convictions in such matters upon the sure word of God.

Peter writes, "But he that lacketh these things is blind, and cannot see afar off, and hath forgotten that he was purged from his old sins." The missing "these things" is the same as those in the previous verses. He is indicating a person who has failed to add to their saving faith the other qualities that make growth possible. They have not been diligent in seeking to be a growing Christian. The certain consequence is spiritual blindness. This blindness is explained as involving spiritual nearsightedness. While they may be able to perceive the things that are near, the earthly things, they will not be able to see the things that are far off, the heavenly things. This leads to the condition in which they have forgotten that they were cleansed from their old sins.

What kind of experience is this? Evidently it is a person who has been "cleansed" from sin in a wonderful conversion experience, but they did not grow. Because of the failure to grow as a Christian, they soon found themselves loaded down with guilt over the sins from which they were delivered when they came to Christ. They have forgotten. They have lost their assurance about the Lord of salvation.

This reminds us of the source of doubt in the Christian life. Satan, who is the accuser of the brethren, is the primary source. He brings against us charges and accusations. He seeks to keep fresh in our memory every sin that we have ever committed. How do you overcome the enemy in this matter? You overcome him only as you come to a perception of the truth of God. You grow in your knowledge of the work of Christ upon the Cross for us, and of His present priestly ministry in the heavens for us. As you grow in your understanding of what He has done and is doing, you enjoy more and more assurance. You know that "salvation is of the Lord" and that "he is able to save unto the uttermost those who come unto God by Him." But those who do not grow in their knowledge of the Lord and in their likeness to the Lord will not enjoy this blessed inner assurance.

This truth prompts the other admonition by Peter. "Wherefore the rather, brethren, give diligence to make your calling and election sure." "Sure" is a legal word. It referred to the guaranteeing of a real estate transaction. It meant to make sure everything was legally safe and correct. Here it is a question of making sure about the work of God in our salvation. Have we really experienced the "call" of God, and are really among the "chosen" or "elect" of God. There is a way that we can make sure about these matters. We must give more diligence to spiritual growth. We must give ourselves to the assignment of adding the needed qualities to our faith, of developing in us the Christ-like character.

This should say something to us about assurance. You do not base your assurance upon the type of experience that you had at the beginning of the Christian life, but upon the things that have happened in your life since. Are there evidences of spiritual growth? Has there been the evidence of the divine nature within you? Has there been a growth in your knowledge of the Lord? Has He been becoming more precious to you? Have you been growing in your perception of the truth of God? These are things on which we ground our assurance. Those who grow will know. Those who do not grow will forget.

Conclusion:

This is only a partial presentation of this great passage, but it is surely enough to give us encouragement to become serious in the matters of spiritual growth. Let me speak directly to you. It is obvious to me that we are many, but we are not much when it comes to our impact on our world. There is an unrealized potential in many of us. We have not become all that we could in our Christian lives. It shows up in our ineffectiveness in service and our uncertainty in salvation.

It is time for you to get serious about doing something to grow as a Christian, I stand ready to assist any of you personally in any way possible that you might grow. Will you give immediate attention to this matter?