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**SERMONS L. & LI.**

THE NATURE AND MEANS OF GROWTH IN GRACE.

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2 PETER, iii. 18.—*Grow in grace.*

THE word "grace" is of frequent occurrence, and high and interesting import, in the sacred Scriptures. In the great concern of man's salvation, no other word has a richer meaning. But while the general idea of the term is every where retained, there are several shades of difference in the signification, as it is used in different passages of the sacred text. Its primary and more usual sense is, the favour of God to sinners; or in other words, the love and mercy of God. In this acceptation, grace is the fountain of life, the source of salvation, to which all other blessings may be traced, as to their first cause. Thus Paul, (who abounds in the use of this word,) in his epistle to the Ephesians, says, "Having predestinated us to the adoption of children, by Jesus Christ to himself, according to the good pleasure of his will, to the praise of the glory of his grace, wherein he hath made us accepted in the Beloved." And again, "By grace are ye saved,"—"that in the ages to come he might show the exceeding riches of his grace, in his kindness towards us through Christ Jesus."

But as the gospel is the channel through which this fountain pours forth its exuberant streams, it is called, not only "the gospel of the grace of God," but "grace" itself. As where it is said, "We then as workers together with him, beseech you, that ye receive not the grace of God in vain." And also in the following text, "For the grace of God, that bringeth salvation, hath appeared unto all men;" in both which passages, the least attention to the context will show, that by the grace of God is meant the gospel.

And as the gospel is rendered effectual to the salvation of sinners, only by the aid of the Holy Spirit, therefore his influences on the heart have also received the name of grace: as, "My grace is sufficient for thee:" "By the grace of God I am what I am:" "And his grace which was bestowed upon me was not in vain; but I laboured more abundantly than they all; yet not I, but the grace of God which was with me."

But in our text, the word "grace," has a meaning somewhat different from what it has in any of the passages which have been cited. Christians are here exhorted to "grow in grace;" which would not be a practicable thing, in any of the senses of the word already given. By "grace," here, we must understand, the principle of new life, implanted in regeneration; a sense of the word, much in use among us, but rather unusual in the Scriptures.

When the apostle exhorts Christians to "grow in grace," it is the same, as if he had said, increase in holiness, or advance in piety. And it would not be easy to select a subject of greater importance, to all professors of religion. If comfort and usefulness here, and the degree of our felicity and glory in heaven, will be proportioned to our growth in grace, then the subject possesses an intrinsic importance, which should command the attention, and deeply interest the feelings, of all who hear me. What I propose then is,

I. To explain the nature of growth in grace.

II. To inquire, by what means growth in grace may be promoted.

It is evidently implied in the exhortation, that the persons addressed, were the subjects of grace; for that which has no existence cannot increase. But grace is a plant which does not grow in nature's garden. It is of heavenly origin. By nature we are all "children of wrath," conceived in sin, and totally destitute of holiness. None, therefore, but the truly regenerated soul is capable of growth in grace. We have, it is true, a rational nature and a moral constitution, and are accountable, free agents; but in relation to spiritual exercises, we are dead—"dead in trespasses and sins." If there existed naturally in man, any principle of spiritual life, it might, by assiduity and favourable circumstances, be enkindled; and by being cherished, might, by degrees, advance to maturity. A seed, which possesses vitality, although it has lain dormant for a thousand years, yet when placed in a congenial soil, and subjected to the influences of heat, air, and moisture, will readily sprout, and grow, until it arrives at maturity. But if the vital principle be lost, it will never give any indications of life; and all the skill and power of man can never cause it to vegetate. And yet, this seed, when subjected to the minutest scrutiny by the aid of the best optical glasses, may appear to have no defect in its internal structure. It may possess the perfect organization of seeds of the same species, but its vitality has fled, and no power on earth can restore it.

Analogous to this is the condition of the human soul. Possessed still of all the faculties with which it was created, it has lost the image of God, which consisted "in righteousness and true holiness." The principle of spiritual life with which it was animated, has become extinct. And as the communication of life of every kind is the prerogative of God, so the regeneration of the soul is ascribed to him in Scripture; and as this work requires the exertion of the same power, which at first caused light to shine out of darkness, it is denominated "a new creation;" and, as there is in it, some analogy to the raising a dead body from the grave, it is called "a resurrection;" but as this divine power is exerted in a free and sovereign manner, without any consideration of merit in the creature, it is called "grace."

Although grace does not exist in any man by nature, but as a communicated principle, yet it may be received at any period of our existence, in this world, from infancy to old age; and we read of some who were sanctified from the womb; but as far as can be judged from experience, the number of such is very small. Piety is seldom observed to exist with the first dawning

of reason and moral feeling. Most persons, therefore, who become the subjects of grace, can remember the time, when they were alienated from the life of God; and have some knowledge of the change which took place in their views and affections.

Another thing implied in the exhortation of our text is, that grace in its commencement is imperfect, and that its progress to maturity is gradual; for if it were perfect, there could be no room for growth. Although, in different individuals, the vigour of spiritual life is different in degree, yet in most cases, grace is in its infancy feeble. The indications of its existence may be very clear, and its actings lively; but still, this is nothing more than the vivacity and strength of a healthy babe in Christ. For in young converts the knowledge of spiritual things, generally, is indistinct and confined, and their faith wavering. When their feelings are joyful, they can exercise confidence in God; but when a dark cloud overshadows them, they are cast down with discouragement, and sometimes driven to distrust the mercy and faithfulness of the Redeemer, to whom they have committed their souls. Their pious affections also are unsteady, and though apparently strong, are nevertheless mingled with gross animal feelings, and alloyed with selfishness. As grace is progressive in its nature, it may be inferred, that where there is no growth, there is no life. The degree and rapidity of advancement in all, however, is not the same: nor does it bear an exact proportion, in every case, to the vigour of the principle of spiritual life, at the time of the new birth: As it is an observable fact, that some infants at first are so feeble, that they can barely be said to be alive, and yet after a while, by assiduous nursing, become much more robust, than others that commenced life with greater strength; so, in the divine life, some Christians, who in the beginning, gave but obscure indications of grace, afterwards become vigorous in piety, and far outstrip many, whose commencement promised more eminent advancement. It should be remarked here also, that the life of piety in the soul is subject to such diseases and decays as often greatly retard its progress, and cause it, for a season, to decline. These declensions are so common, that some have supposed, that all Christians do, in some part of their course, make a retrograde motion; and instead of advancing, lose something of the ground already gained. But there seems to be no just foundation for this opinion. In some saints, both of those whose lives are recorded in Scripture, and of those who fall under our own observation, there is no evidence of backsliding; but still it is a lamentable fact, that there are very few, who have lived long in the profession of piety, who have not reason to confess with shame, that they have at some time "left their first love," and become remiss in their vigilance, and, of course, unfruitful in their lives. And not unfrequently, while in this feeble state, they are overcome by some temptation, so as not only to contract a painful sense of guilt, but also to bring reproach on the holy profession they have made. This frequency of spiritual decays, is one of the chief causes that so few Christians rise to eminence in piety. A fall may, indeed, make a man more cautious ever afterwards; but he purchases experience at a dear rate, who pays for it with a broken bone, or a joint out of place. And here it may be observed, that

nothing is more insidious and dangerous to the backsliding Christian, than a certain leaven of antinomianism, which too often diffuses its deadening influence over the soul. The soldier of Christ sleeps in the midst of enemies, and dreams of victory without conflict;—he falls under the influence of some temptation, and excuses himself by referring to the example of other saints. But every professor ought to know, that every degree of backsliding is, so far as it goes, an evidence against the reality of his piety. Many, alas! who once appeared well, go back by a perpetual declension, and thus prove that the “root of the matter” was never in them. Every step in this backward course, should be viewed as an alarming circumstance; and it may be safely affirmed, that all confidence of security indulged by any, while in a backsliding state, is delusive. A man may, indeed, be in a safe state, as to his ultimate salvation, when under a spiritual decay; but he cannot in such a state, possess any satisfactory evidence of safety.

The strong tendency of the heart, even in the best, to depart from God, furnishes a powerful reason for the exhortation, to “grow in grace;” for, in religion, it has often been observed, that there is no such thing as standing still. If the Christian makes no advancement, he is pretty certainly going backward. The only course of safety, therefore, as well as comfort, is, to make vigorous efforts to “grow in grace.”

The nature of growth in grace, after what has been said, will require little explanation. It is a gradual increase in the vigour and purity of all those affections in which holiness consists; and is necessarily accompanied with a decrease of the power of sin. A real growth in grace includes also an advancement in spiritual knowledge, especially in the knowledge of our own depravity and helplessness, and of the Lord Jesus Christ as our Mediator. The apostle, therefore, joins these two things together, in his exhortation, and says, “Grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

An increase of faith is an essential part of growth in grace. The belief of the reality and excellence of divine things becomes more firm and constant; a more implicit reliance is placed on the promises of God; and the soul, in the exercise of humble confidence, is enabled to commit all its concerns, for time and eternity, to the care of a covenant-keeping God.

But there is no one thing more essentially involved in this progress of religion, than the growing fervour and constancy of love to God. This holy principle continues to strike its roots deeper in the heart, and becomes more and more purified from the alloy with which it was at first mingled. Growth in divine love manifests itself in a reverential esteem for the moral attributes of God, in a greater delight in meditating on his holiness and goodness; and in a livelier exercise of gratitude for His love and mercy towards ourselves and others. It is accompanied also with a more ardent desire to please God, to enjoy communion with him, and to advance his glory in the world.

Progress in real piety includes also an increase of humility. The more true knowledge the believer acquires, the more penetrating is his view of the sin that secretly works within him; and the more holy he becomes, the more abominable does all sin appear. No evidence of growth in grace is less suspicious than this. Hypocrites may, indeed, affect humility, and abound in

the language of self-abasement ; but it is difficult to wear this disguise without betraying one's true state of heart. The growth of grace is as much downward at the root, as upward in the towering and spreading branches ; and he who supposes that he is making a near approximation to perfection, and yet is not abased before God, under a sense of his own vileness, does but deceive himself.

Resignation to the will of God, is another criterion by which growth in grace is ascertained ; or rather, it is an important part of that grace in the heart, of which growth is predicated. The more uniformly and cordially we can say, under all circumstances, even the most afflictive, "Thy will be done," the more strength has the principle of grace acquired. And as genuine progress in piety, is the growth of the whole spiritual man, so our love to the children of God, and our sincere good will to all men, will bear a just proportion to our piety to God.

Moreover, if piety flourish in the inner man of the heart, it will manifest itself by the abundance of its fruits in the life. Holy, active, universal obedience to the commandments of God, will flow from a heart warm with love to God and love to man ; and will evince to others, as well as to ourselves, that we are thriving Christians. Our light will so shine, that others seeing our good works will be induced to glorify our Father who is in heaven. The conversation of a growing Christian will be edifying to all around : his speech will be always with grace, seasoned with salt. Out of the good treasure of his heart, he will be continually bringing forth something good. His example will be a model for the imitation of others ; and in proportion as grace prevails in his heart, there will be exhibited a beautiful consistency in his life. His attention to all the duties of the worship of God, in public and private, will be constant and conscientious ; and with alacrity and energy, he will exert himself to advance the cause and kingdom of Christ, in the world ; counting no service too hard, and no sacrifice too costly, which will aid in promoting the glory of God, by the propagation of the gospel throughout the world.

Several stages, in the progress of the spiritual life, may be particularly noticed. The first is the state of the Christian immediately after his conversion ; when both novelty and contrast are combined with the excellence of the objects presented to his view, in the new world into which grace has translated him, to make a more sensible impression on his mind than will be produced by the same truths afterwards. A new creation has, indeed, risen up before him ; "old things are passed away, and behold all things are become new." His wonder is excited, his joy overflows, his hopes are buoyant, and his heart melts with tender compassion for those who are yet out of Christ. His frames are often delightful, but they are transient : and from the mount of vision, he quickly descends into the dark valley of doubt and sorrow. He lives rather by sensible feelings than by faith. His eyes often overflow both with joy and grief. In the exercises of religion, he is full of ardour, nor does he suspect a reverse, nor foresee the dangers which beset his path. In fervency of spirit, and alacrity in the service of God, he seems greatly to outstrip older disciples, who have been long engaged in the Christian race ; and is sometimes disposed

to chide them, because they do not manifest that quick susceptibility of feeling, and that glowing zeal, with which he feels his own bosom penetrated and warmed.

This period of the Christian's life bears a strong resemblance to infancy and childhood, when a succession of lively emotions fills up our days ; when vivacity and activity are predominant traits in our character ; when our transitions from one state of feeling to the opposite, are sudden and frequent ; and when our happiness depends very much upon our ignorance of the evils which surround us. The cup of joy would be embittered to the young convert, if he had a clear view of the depth of iniquity which still remains in his heart, and of the dangers and conflicts which await him in his future pilgrimage.

The second stage is that of temptation and severe conflict. Before, he resembled the young soldier just enlisted, and enjoying his bounty-money ; but now his case is like that of the combatant on the field of battle. The same power which opened a passage for the children of Israel through the Red sea, could have transported them to Canaan in a day or an hour, but it was the plan of their invisible Leader to conduct them through the wilderness, and subject them to numerous difficulties and temptations, that he might put their faith and obedience to a severe test. So, also, our Heavenly Father could translate his redeemed children at once to heaven, or could render their passage through the world uniformly pleasant ; but, instead of pursuing either of these courses, he leaves them to learn, by bitter experience, the treachery and wickedness of their own hearts, and the malicious devices of the invisible enemy, who is ever ready to assault and vex them.

These trials, from causes which exist from without and within, often come upon the people of God at a time when they have "left their first love," and have become remiss in watchfulness and prayer. A conscience goaded with inward stings, is a fit subject for Satan to operate upon with his fiery darts : and his usual method is, first to seduce the unwary souls by baits of worldly glory or sensual pleasure, and then to attack the debilitated believer with desperate suggestions, calculated to make the impression, that the favour of God is "clean gone," and that "he will be merciful no more ;" or, that his sins are unpardonable ; or that the day of grace is gone by for ever. Now, also, the providence of God seems to combine with other causes to afflict Zion's pilgrim. Dark clouds of adversity gather over him. Earthly comforts decay. The sun of prosperity no longer shines. The fondest hopes are disappointed, and the brightest prospects of earthly bliss obscured. Malignant enemies arise from among those before considered friends ; health is broken ; slander and reproach assail ; dear friends and relatives are buried in the grave ; children are disobedient and profligate, or die prematurely ; and, to complete the list of troubles, the church, broken with schism, and overrun with heresy and hypocrisy, sits in sackcloth and mourns. Now the Christian pilgrim spends his days in trouble, and his nights in groans and tears. If, under these accumulated evils, the light of the Divine countenance was lifted upon him, he could still rejoice in the midst of tribulations ; but, to add poignancy to all his other griefs, his Heavenly Father seems to frown upon him. To his most earnest prayers he receives no answer ; or, if an answer comes, it is only this, "My grace is sufficient for

thee." But no evils so grievously afflict the renewed soul, as the corruptions of the heart. Evils unsuspected to exist now show themselves, and manifest a strength and obstinacy, which baffle all the resolutions and efforts directed against them. Pride, envy, unbelief, insensibility, impurity, sloth, and evil thoughts without number, pollute and harrass the afflicted spirit.

These conflicts are not experienced in an equal degree by all Christians, but every one has his share, and every one knows the plague of his own heart, so much better than that of others, that his secret thought is, that his case is, of all others, the most deplorable and desperate. In his extremity he is often ready to exclaim, "If I am a child of God, why am I thus? Surely no others are so beset with sinful entanglements, and distracted with contending passions."

There is, probably, in every case of Christian experience, something peculiar, something which distinguishes it from every other case; but there is, notwithstanding, so great a general resemblance in the conflicts of the pious, that he who knows his own heart, sees, as in a glass, the condition of all his brethren. For "as in water face answereth to face, so the heart of man to man."

This may be termed the winter season of grace. The tree is now stripped of its foliage and its bloom, and very little fruit appears on the branches. But while it is shaken by the fierce blasts, so as to be almost overturned, it may be gaining strength by the concussions, and may be striking its roots more firmly in the earth. So the tempted and afflicted Christian, while he experiences a great loss of comfort and sensibility, may be, and often is, actually growing in grace. Much knowledge of the deceitfulness of the heart, and of the exceeding sinfulness of sin, is obtained; a deadly blow is struck at the root of self-confidence and self-righteousness; a broken and contrite spirit is produced; Christ and his grace are more highly appreciated; and the desire of total and universal purification from sin becomes more constant and intense.

The third and last stage in the progress of the divine life, is a state of settled peace, when the violence of the conflict is over, and the risings of sinful passions are greatly subdued by the power of divine grace. This is the sweet calm which succeeds the storm. Now there is, instead of doubts and darkness, a comfortable assurance of the favour of God. This period is characterized by a steady trust in the promises and providence of God, and a meek submission to his holy will. The mature Christian is not less sensible of the depth of remaining depravity than before; for the more holy he becomes, the more quick-sighted he is to discern the minutest spots which defile the "inner man:" but he has now learned to live by "faith on the Son of God," and has formed the habit of continual application to the "blood of sprinkling," and to "the fountain opened for sin and uncleanness." Many of his former besetting sins are indeed subdued; and he has learned the necessity of vigilance in guarding against the occasions of sin, as well as against the first buddings of evil desire: but his peace does not result from any views which he takes of an increase of sanctification in himself, but from keeping his eye steadily fixed on "Jesus, the author and finisher of his faith."

This advanced state of piety is also characterized by an increasing dead

ness to the world and all selfish interests, and by an enlarged and sincere good will to all men; but especially by a tender solicitude for the prosperity of Zion, and an anxious desire for the salvation of men.

This has sometimes been denominated the state of contemplation; because in it the meditations of the Christian are much occupied with heavenly things. The glory of the invisible world makes a deeper and more constant impression on his mind than formerly, and his thoughts are often elevated to delightful contemplations of the heavenly state. The aged saint, who has become mature in grace, and whose faith has grown strong, spends much of his time, by day and by night, in meditating on that "rest which remains for the people of God." In this exercise his soul is frequently absorbed, and he is fired with an intense desire "to be absent from the body and present with the Lord;" yet his submission to the divine will, and his desire to promote the glory of Christ on earth, will not permit him to be impatient. He is willing to wait, even in the midst of suffering, until his change come. How beautiful, how lovely, how venerable, is old age, thus laden with the fruits of piety; and like a shock of corn fully ripe, waiting to be gathered into the garner of the Lord! When the veteran soldier of the cross is unable to perform any more active service for his Master, he still watches about the doors of the sanctuary;—he still lifts up his withered and trembling hands in prayer for the peace of Jerusalem. He is ever waiting for the consolation of Israel; and when the Saviour appears by some remarkable manifestation of favour to his church, he can exclaim with Simeon of old, "Now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, for mine eyes have seen thy salvation." And often, when the vigour of the mental faculties begins to fail, the flame of piety continues to burn brightly; and, on a dying bed, such Christians exhibit a spectacle, than which there is nothing more lovely and interesting on this side heaven. Calm submission, humble confidence, holy aspirations, the kind emotions of benevolence, and the sublime joy of the Divine favour, often render the chamber of death like the vestibule of the temple above. Who, then, would not join in the prayer, "Let me die the death of the righteous, and let my last end be like his?"

A few brief reflections shall bring this discourse to a close.

1. It appears from what has been said, that in some stages of the Christian's progress, the growth of grace, when it actually takes place, is not easily ascertained. It is, therefore, reasonable to believe, that some pious persons fall into mistakes on this subject, and judge that they are losing ground, when in fact they are slowly advancing. Because their first fervours have abated, and because they are conscious of much more indwelling sin than when they first believed, they draw the conclusion that they have been, all the time, growing worse: whereas, true religion has been taking deeper root in their hearts, and their knowledge of themselves and of divine truth, is greatly enlarged, and has become much more distinct.

2. It is also evident, from what has been said, that there may be a great display of zeal, much attention to the externals of religion, much liberality in contributing to the support and spread of the gospel, and much appearance of sanctity, when there has been no real advancement in piety. The reason



is, because all these external acts, and all this show of piety, may be produced by other motives than the lively exercise of grace in the heart. Such persons ought to be esteemed pious by men, where no contrary evidences appear : but often, "that which is highly esteemed among men, is an abomination in the sight of God ;" for man must judge according to the outward appearance, but the Lord searcheth the heart.

3. Some Christians grow to much higher stature than others. In most, however, in our days, the advancement in piety seems to be small, compared with what we have reason to believe it was in the times of the apostles, and in some other periods of the church. No doubt there are some now who become eminent in piety ; but the general standard of piety is apparently low. Few professors, in our churches, have attained to that state of settled peace, and calm submission to the will of God, which was described as the last stage in the Christian's progress towards perfection.

4. It is impossible to say how much the comfort and usefulness of most of the pious is diminished, by their failing to make greater progress in the divine life. The difference between a lively, growing Christian, and one who makes little or no advancement, is as great as between a healthy and a diseased body. The motives to growth in grace are, therefore, of the strongest possible kind.

Finally, upon a review of the past, every one of us must be sensible, that if we had improved our privileges, and exercised greater diligence and vigilance, our advancement would have been far greater than it now is. What Christian can look back without severely reproaching himself, on account of his slothfulness and carelessness ? All may not have backslidden, but in all there has been often a criminal remissness. Many have to lament most sad declensions, and some, disgraceful falls, by which the conscience has been wounded and religion dishonoured.

In view of this subject, therefore, all Christians are called upon to humble themselves before God, in deep penitence, on account of their unfruitfulness ; and to resolve, that in time to come, they will more faithfully and vigorously strive TO GROW IN GRACE.

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## SERMON LI.

### MEANS OF GROWTH IN GRACE.

2 PETER, iii. 18.—*Grow in grace.*

HAVING, in the preceding discourse, considered the nature of growth in grace, I propose now to inquire,

II. By what means this growth may be promoted.

The exhortation of the text evidently supposes that something must be done by us. The mere idle wishing for the object will never effect it. Means must be used ; diligence must be exercised. I would, therefore, endeavour to explain what is requisite, in order that we may fulfil the duty here enjoined, and may obtain the blessings connected with its due performance.

Perhaps there is no method by which we shall be able to obtain more dis-

tinct and satisfactory ideas on this subject, than by considering the analogy which exists between growth in grace and the natural growth of the human body, from infancy to mature age. Suppose, then, the inquiry to be made, By what means may an infant be most successfully preserved in health, and caused to grow to the full stature and strength of a man? Every one upon reflection would answer,

1. That the first and principal thing requisite, must be a sufficient supply of wholesome and suitable nutriment. Now, the same thing is true in regard to the child of grace. He must receive, from time to time, spiritual food adapted to his state of advancement. As in the natural life, milk is given to babes, and strong meat to full-grown men, so Paul teaches us, that in the spiritual life the analogy holds good; and Peter employs the same allusion, and moreover informs us, what that food is which is figuratively called milk. "As new born babes," says he, "desire the sincere milk of *the word*, that ye may grow thereby."

This subject is also treated a large, by the Supreme Teacher. Christ says, "I am that bread of life. Your fathers did eat manna in the wilderness, and are dead. This is that bread which cometh down from heaven, that a man may eat thereof and not die. I am the living bread which came down from heaven. If any man eat of this bread he shall live for ever: and the bread that I will give is my flesh.—Whoso eateth my flesh and drinketh my blood hath eternal life; —for my flesh is meat indeed, and my blood is drink indeed."

We learn, then, that the *word of God* is the proper food of the spiritual man, and that the excellency of the word and its adaptation to nourish the soul, are owing to its exhibiting Jesus Christ, and him crucified, to the believer's faith. It is in every sense true, "that the just shall live by faith;" and the whole virtue and efficacy of faith is derived from its Object.

The means, therefore, to be used constantly, to promote growth in grace, is the reading and hearing of the word. There can be no growth in grace without the word, any more than of the body without food. Here we have the object of every pious affection, and the motive to every holy act. Faith rests on the word; the excellence and beauty which enkindle our love are found in the word of God, and nowhere else; and hope could not exist, were it not for the firm promises with which the Scriptures abound. The sacraments are also means of promoting the hidden life of the believer; especially, the Lord's supper is eminently calculated to nourish piety in the heart; but the sacraments would be useless without the word. Their import cannot be known, but as it is exhibited by the word.

He, therefore, who would grow in grace, must be conversant with the holy Scriptures. He should turn over the sacred pages by day and by night, and should not merely read and hear, but take pains to understand. But with regard to many who are unskilful in the word of life, how can they understand unless some one teach them? Young Christians, especially, need instruction as much as children, and for this reason the ministry has been ordained. "And he gave some apostles, and some prophets, and some evangelists and teachers, for the edifying of the body of Christ; till we all come in the unity

of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ." Christ's charge to Peter was, "Feed my sheep—feed my lambs;" and that of the apostle Paul to the elders of Ephesus, "Feed the flock of Christ which is among you." It appears, then, that it belongs to the office of the ministry to furnish requisite nutriment for the support and growth of the people of God; and this provision is contained in the word of God, which they should clearly exhibit and rightly divide, so that each one may receive his portion in due season. And as God will certainly give efficacy to his own ordinances, when properly used, we may expect to derive from the authorized administration of the word and sacraments, such supplies of light and strength, as will enable us to grow in grace.

But as food will not nourish unless it is digested, so the mere hearing or reading of the word, will not cause us to advance in the divine life, unless we diligently meditate on the truths brought to our knowledge. Sacred meditation is a duty often mentioned in the Bible, and is one of great importance to enable the soul to grow in grace. It is needful that we should frequently abstract our thoughts from this world, and all its concerns, and fix them steadily and intensely on divine things. In order that truth should produce on the mind its full effect, it must not only be apprehended, but kept in the view of the mind, for a considerable time. Cursory thoughts of God and divine things make only a transient impression; but when, by devout meditation, these interesting objects are held up to view, the soul will perceive more and more of their beauty and importance, until often it will be completely absorbed in their contemplation: and such seasons of meditation are not only delightful, but leave a deep and salutary impression on the heart. And the more frequently such seasons occur, the more easy does it become to withdraw the soul from earth, and fix it on heavenly things; and our relish for this exercise will so increase, that instead of feeling the duty to be a burden, we shall esteem it our highest privilege; so that it will sometimes require self-denial to break off from our sacred meditations to attend on the performance of other duties. Christians, who are much in the habit of meditation, under the guidance of the divine word, cannot but increase in grace; for, in this employment, every holy affection is enkindled;—we obtain nearer views of Christ and of heaven, and learn to feel that we are strangers and pilgrims on earth, and that our home and our treasure are above.

It is the unhappiness of most professors, that they are so much involved in worldly occupations, that they find no suitable time for divine meditation: but is not the importance of the end to be gained, sufficient to make it proper and reasonable to redeem time for this purpose? Would it not be expedient, in imitation of our Lord, often to rise "a great while before day," that we may, without interruption, enjoy the benefit of holy contemplation? The hour will arrive, when we shall be forced to relinquish the world, and then, when we look back, we shall certainly be of the opinion, that that time was best improved, which was spent with God, and in preparation for eternity.

And here, I would remark, that whole days occasionally devoted to prayer and meditation, especially when joined with fasting, have been found eminently serviceable in promoting growth in grace. More progress is some-

times made in one such day of exclusive devotion to personal religion, than in weeks and months spent in the common way.

2. Another thing considered essential to the promotion of bodily health and vigour, is exercise. By this means every part of the body is rendered strong and active, and acquires its proper size and use. A child confined to one spot, and hindered from exercising its limbs, would be retarded in its growth, and be incapable of performing the most common actions of life. Without proper exercise, no one could run or walk with steadiness and agility, nor use his hands to any useful purpose. And here also, the analogy between the natural and spiritual life is complete. Exercise is as necessary to the inward as to the outward man. If the principle of spiritual life be not frequently and vigorously exercised, it will necessarily be weak and sickly. Even if any particular grace be not excited and brought into action, there will be a corresponding defect in the Christian character. As, therefore, we perform many actions merely for the sake of exercising the body, so we should seek opportunities of giving exercise to every virtue of the Christian life. This object should be kept daily in view, and steadily pursued; and where there is proper vigilance, there can be no want of occasions for bringing into act, all holy dispositions. Every person we meet, every event which occurs, will furnish opportunity for some pious or benevolent exercise. And in this view, even those incidents which in themselves are unpleasant, may be turned to a good account. Do we fall into the company of profane and wicked men? here is occasion given to exhibit some part of the Christian character, or to exercise some Christian grace. Do we meet with reproach and ill usage? well, let the spirit of Christian meekness and forbearance, or forgiveness, now be displayed. Are we suffering under bodily pain? then, let us learn to exercise patience and fortitude.

It has often been remarked, that benevolent affections are greatly strengthened by repeated exercise. The man who relieves the distressed, or supplies the wants of the poor, will be more ready to perform these works of mercy, after having done so a thousand times, than when first called upon to discharge that duty. It has sometimes been matter of surprise, that they who have already given most to forward public and benevolent objects, are always most prompt to contribute on any new occasion. But this is the natural and genuine effect of exercise. He, whose benevolence is often exerted, will ever be found to delight in doing good; and, when he has money to spare, he will find no way of spending it so agreeable, as to make it instrumental in promoting some benevolent object. And so strong may this feeling become, that it will be the most cogent motive to engage a man to put forth all his energy of mind and body, to procure the means of advancing the cause of religion.

But why need I dwell on this subject? for who is unacquainted with the power of habit? And what is habit, but a readiness and propensity to perform some action, induced by a repetition of that action? How great would be our moral improvement, if virtuous habits were as commonly cherished by exercise, as those which are vicious? But there are, also, habits of piety. A man may, by repeated exercise, form the habit of devotion; he may form the habit

of self-denial ; of spiritual-mindedness ; of penitence ; and, in short, of every good work.

But the neglect of exercising Christian virtues and dispositions has, on the other hand, a baleful tendency, and is altogether inconsistent with a growing state of piety.

If you would grow in grace, then, you must be an active Christian ; but your activity must commence in right motives of heart. Many are active in external things, while secret ambition and vain glory are the principles which in them are increased by exercise. But let us "exercise ourselves unto godliness," and in every species of benevolence, and also in the mortification of the sin that dwells within us. Thus shall we grow in every grace, and glorify God by bearing much fruit, and every variety of good fruit. According to the affectionate and earnest exhortation of Paul to the Corinthian believers, let us "be steadfast, unmoveable, always abounding in the work of the Lord."

3. A third thing necessary to the growth of the body, is a salubrious atmosphere. Nearly as much depends on good air, for the health of the natural life, as on wholesome food. Where the atmosphere is impregnated with pestilential vapours, it is difficult to escape disease, and much more so to increase in health and strength. Parents, who are solicitous about the welfare of their children, will place them, if possible, in a pure air. Well, there is a moral as well as a physical atmosphere. This is formed by the sentiments and character of society. Man must be connected, by social intercourse, with his fellow-men. The Christian religion does not require, nor even permit us, to go out of the world to avoid the wicked. And who is exempt from the influence of the prevalent opinions and practices of those around him ? But we find a great difference in different situations in the world. For, while some places have their whole moral atmosphere corrupted, so that no one can breathe it without the danger of being poisoned, others are comparatively safe and salubrious. When you enter some families, you are immediately sensible that you are walking on hallowed ground : every thing indicates that the fear of God is in that house ; and even the profane, when they enter, are overawed with some degree of reverence for the holiness which reigns there. But how different is the fact in regard to other dwellings ! The same observation may be made respecting different towns and villages. Where the influence of religion is predominant, every one feels the benefit, who is not abandoned to vice. But, alas ! how few are the places in which this happy state of things exists ! How does iniquity almost every where abound ! This prevalence of corruption is, no doubt, one principal reason why there is no more growth in piety among Christians. They are weak and sickly because they breathe a tainted atmosphere. While we see the men of this world sagacious in the selection of places of residence where health may be enjoyed, and where the circumstances are favourable to their prosperity in other respects, we seldom discover in Christians a similar wisdom in relation to their spiritual improvement. "The children of this world are wiser in their generation than the children of light." Lot, smitten with the beauty and fertility of the land, pitched his tent "even unto Sodom," and there he abides. No wonder, then.

that in such a place his righteous soul is vexed from day to day—no wonder that he makes slow progress in grace—no wonder that his family become infected with the love of sinful pleasure—and no wonder, that being allied to the wicked inhabitants of that voluptuous town, most of them perish in the common destruction. Even his wife is set up as a perpetual memorial of the danger of looking back with sinful desire or regret upon the pleasures of the wicked.

There is a prevalent evil in our country, which is so common, that it seems to be but little noticed. It is the practice of many professors, of leaving places, where Christian society and the ordinances of the gospel are enjoyed, to dwell in the new settlements, without making any provision for the supply of their spiritual wants; influenced, altogether, by a regard to worldly profit. In those desolate regions, it often occurs, that months and years pass over their heads, without the hearing of one gospel sermon. Their children grow up, nearly as wild and irreligious as the heathen in their neighbourhood; not even enjoying, in many cases, the benefits of a common school. How, I would ask, will such persons be able to answer for the irreparable injury done to their families, by removing them far away from the house of God, and all the public means of grace? The question may be asked, whether a man who happens to reside where evangelical preaching is not heard, ought to change his residence, so as to live under the sound of the gospel? I would answer, assuredly; unless he has a reasonable ground of hope, that he can be personally useful to the people where he dwells, or can be instrumental in procuring the establishment of the means of grace among them. For what is the body to the soul? What comparison is there between growth in riches, and growth in grace? And who can be excused for exposing to eternal death, the souls of those committed to his care, for the sake of procuring for them a larger share of earthly property? If we would grow in grace, we must live within reach of the means of grace. Let Christians look well to this matter, in choosing their residence, and also in disposing of their children, for the purposes of education, or for acquiring a trade or profession. And I would say, further, when you have choice of preachers, or are about to call a pastor, see that you have regard to the spiritual welfare of your soul, and the souls of your families, in making your selection.

4. But as the spiritual life, as well as the natural, is subject to various diseases, in providing for its health and growth, we must have respect to medicine, as well as to food, exercise, and air. We know, that in regard to the body, if disease prey on the vitals, food, however nutritious, will answer no purpose in promoting growth; until, by appropriate remedies, the malady is healed. And the same is true with respect to the soul. When diseased, it requires medicine; and it is matter of gratitude, that our Great Physician has, for the most part, reserved these salutary applications to himself. Pastors, indeed, by a wise and tender application of the discipline of the church, may prevent and cut off many evils. Private rebuke, in Christian love, would often be medicinal to the erring Christian. But that process which is most common and effectual to recover such a soul, is to cause it to pass through

the furnace of affliction. Because of the salutary effect of afflictions, in awakening the conscience, exciting to prayer, weaning us from the world, and breaking and humbling our hearts, they are a part of that provision which Christ has made for his disciples; and are accordingly promised, in close connexion with the sweetest blessings which he bestows. As gold is not only tried in the fire, but purified from its dross, so the believer comes out of the furnace often greatly improved. Let no one, therefore, think strange, "concerning the fiery trial." "Through much tribulation we must enter into the kingdom." "In the world ye shall have tribulation." These trials we are not to seek, but leave the application of them to our faithful Redeemer. But although it is not ours to employ this means of advancement in piety, yet, when we are cast down into the vale of sorrow, it is incumbent on us to improve these afflictive dispensations, and to esteem them among the most effectual means of growing in grace. "No chastisement for the present is joyous, but grievous, yet afterwards it worketh the peaceable fruits of righteousness in them who are exercised thereby." When was it known, that a backslider was reclaimed without the severity of the rod? And where do we behold religion in its highest exercise, and loveliest appearance, but in affliction? Therefore, one speaking from deep experience said, "It is good for me that I have been afflicted; for before I was afflicted I went astray, but now have I kept thy word." When, therefore, O Christian, you enjoy this powerful means of healing the diseases of the soul, consider the benefit which may accrue to you, and yield not to weak despondency, nor to excessive sorrow; but with vigour set yourself to make such improvement of God's dealings with you, as may eventuate in your abundant growth in grace.

5. There is one thing more which demands our attention, in considering the means of growing in grace; and that of more importance than all the rest; for without it, all other means will be useless. You will readily understand that I speak of the influences of the Holy Spirit; with which I connect importunate, persevering prayer, as the means appointed by God, for obtaining those sanctifying influences. Of what avail would be the husbandman's ploughing and sowing, if the early and latter rain should be withheld? And what would be the efficacy of all our reading, and praying, and meditating, and fasting; and of all our trials and afflictions, if the Spirit of God should be withdrawn? By the Holy Spirit, we obtain light, and faith, and indeed every good thought which ever arises in our minds; "for we are not sufficient of ourselves to think any thing as of ourselves, but our sufficiency is of God," "who worketh in us both to will and to do of his own good pleasure." But the promise of the Spirit does not supersede the use of the ordinary means of grace;—it gives them all their worth and efficacy. And as this rich gift of God, this sum of all "good things," is particularly and solemnly promised in answer to prayer, I have chosen to consider this powerful means, in this place. Without prayer, the spiritual life cannot exist, much less can it grow. Prayer is the breathing of the "new man" after God; it is the instrument by which we resist every enemy, and acquire every blessing. The prayer of faith removes mountains. It unlocks the treasures of grace,

and brings into the soul that blessed peace, which Christ promised to his disciples before he left them. But when we have declared, that the promise of the Spirit is made to prayer, with the strongest possible assurances of its being answered, we have said every thing ; for that heart into which the Comforter comes, and takes up his abode, possesses the pledge, the earnest, and the seal of every blessing, in earth and heaven, which can be of real benefit to the Christian. "All things," says Paul, "are yours ; whether Paul, or Apollos, or Cephas, or life, or death, or things present, or things to come ; all are yours, and ye are Christ's, and Christ is God's."

Now, Christian, having set before you a view of the means necessary to be used to promote growth in grace, what remains but that you, without delay, apply yourself, with increasing diligence, to the work before you ? As this is a gradual progress, and as much of your time has already run to waste, it is urgently necessary, that you work while it is called to-day ; especially, as, for aught you know, your remaining time may be very short.

Aged Christian, when you look back on the race which you have run, have you not much reason to bewail your past negligence ? Do you not now see and feel, that many golden opportunities have been suffered to pass away without improvement ? In regard to the past, however, nothing can be done, but to repent. Yet from the loss sustained in time past, we may derive a powerful motive to make every exertion to grow in grace, during the short period that yet remains. Let us, then, loosen our worldly attachments ;—let us place the grave and all the solemn realities which lie beyond it, full before our eyes ;—and let us "give all diligence to make our calling and election sure." It is, dear brethren, high time for us to have all doubts resolved on this momentous subject. Doubt, as well as positive guilt, will be a troublesome companion on a death-bed. As you come near to your Father's house, then, let your thoughts fix on those numerous mansions which Christ has gone to prepare for his humble followers. We shall soon have no more concern with this world ; why then should we be guilty of the folly of setting our affections upon it ?

And, to younger Christians, let me say affectionately, if you cannot find, in the aged examples for imitation, yet surely if you listen to our experience, you may derive from us, lessons of warning. When we see you pressing forward, with all your sails expanded, we wish you a prosperous voyage ; but when we reflect on the hidden rocks and quicksands which lie in your course, we cannot but fear for your safety ; especially, when we behold so many wrecks on every side.

Finally, I would say to all Christians, of every age, and of every condition, if you would be useful in life, and if you would be eminently happy, both here and hereafter, GROW IN GRACE. Amen.