

The Spiritual Growth Of A Christian.

Text: 2 Cor 3:17-18
suggested hymns:

358, 262, 106, 293, 164

- 1) Is caused by the vision of the glory of Christ, revealed by the Holy Spirit
- 2) Is a progressive change into the likeness of Christ

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all. Amen.

The text for our sermon today is 2 Corinthians 3:17-18, *¹⁷ Now the Lord is the Spirit; and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty. ¹⁸ But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord.* (NKJV)

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us through Your truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

The Christian religion exerts a wonderful influence. It changes the lives of those who take Christ and His teachings seriously. It is therefore necessary that we learn and know the great truths about God contained between the covers of the Bible.

But we must not stop with that statement. We must apply these truths and live them in our lives. That is just as important as learning them. It is not enough merely to know the truths of God's Word and to defend these truths valiantly against all the error of human thinking and opinion which would deny them.

But hand in hand with this must go the application and practice, for *"faith without works is dead."*¹ The knowledge of the truth must bear fruit. A phrase that expresses this same fact is: *The truths of Christianity must become functional in the individual life of the Christian.*

Our Christianity, therefore, must never become something that we set up on a pedestal and come to admire once a week on a Sunday. But the faith and hope that is within us must make of us new creatures in Christ. What we have seen of the glory of God must influence our heart, our way of thinking, our attitudes, and these will, in turn, influence our conduct in our daily life.

The Christian life is not a smug, self-satisfied existence. But rather it is a constant striving against the devil, the world, and our own sinful flesh, and to grow in Christian knowledge and virtue. It is not a mere outward morality and observance of prescribed ceremonies according to the letter of the Law; but it is the life inspired by the Holy Spirit, who gave us the vision of the glory of our loving Saviour, into whose likeness the Christian is to grow.

Let us unfold these thoughts more at length and consider on the basis of Paul's words in our text, *The Spiritual Growth of a Christian*. May the Lord bless our meditation.

1. The Spiritual Growth Of A Christian Is Caused By The Vision Of The Glory Of Christ, Revealed By The Holy Spirit

The Christian religion is supernaturally revealed and super-naturally propagated. On the evening before His crucifixion, the Saviour talked intimately with His disciples about the future. One of the things of which He assured them was that He would send them the Comforter, who is the Holy Spirit. There was a definite reason for this: ***“When He, the Spirit of truth, has come, He will guide you into all truth.”***²

These disciples were not sent forth into the world as heralds of Christ dependent on their own memory and wisdom, but the Holy Spirit taught them all things and brought all things to their remembrance, whatever Jesus said to them.³

The Prophets of old, according to the declaration of Peter, ***“spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit.”***⁴ Christ, the Son of God, came to fulfil all that the Prophets had spoken and to give the world a fuller revelation of God. The Holy Spirit filled the Apostles with the divine truth, so that Paul could declare: ***“These things we also speak, not in words which man's wisdom teaches but which the Holy Spirit teaches.”***⁵ The success of the Gospel was not dependent on the wisdom and learnedness of these first Apostles, but upon the work of the Holy Spirit, for ***“no one can say that Jesus is Lord except by the Holy Spirit.”***⁶ Our Christian religion has been supernaturally revealed and is super-naturally propagated. It is the work of the Holy Spirit both in its origin and in its reception in the hearts of converts. Its sacred truths are contained in your Bible.

In this revelation we have freedom. Thus the Holy Spirit also reveals the glory of Christ to us today, and ***“makes us wise unto salvation”***⁷ through the Scriptures. Where these are studied and accepted, there is the Holy Spirit. And ***“where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty”*** says our text.

All the blessed promises become ours, and in the reception of God’s Word we have liberty. Jesus promised us in John 8:31-32, ***“If you [continue] in My word, you are My disciples indeed.”***³² ***“And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.”*** This means that our spiritual growth consists in the knowledge and application of God’s revealed will.

If we follow God’s Word, we will not become ***“entangled again with a yoke of bondage,”***⁸ of ceremonies and man-made restrictions. Through the Holy Spirit’s revelation in the Bible we have liberty from the errors which blind our mental vision so much that we cannot discern the majesty of Christ. Through it we have freedom from the dominion of our corrupt desires, so that we do by the impulse of the soul what God requires.

We have freedom from the bondage of Satan, so that we can resist his temptations. We have freedom from death, for death shall merely bring us into ***“the glorious liberty of the children of God”***⁹ in the life to come. Such is the liberty of those who listen to the Holy Spirit’s revelation by faith, and having this liberty through which Christ has made us free, we should grow more and more into the likeness of our Lord.

Our Christianity is a reflected knowledge of God’s glory. Re-phrased, our text says ***But we all, with unveiled face, seeing and reflecting, as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord.*** Since all knowledge of God and salvation has been revealed to us by the Holy Spirit, our Christian knowledge is a reflected knowledge of God’s glory.

As the moon cannot shine except by the reflected light of the sun, so little can we have the knowledge of God unless the light of God’s revelation shines into our hearts. Man cannot find or define God with his own inherent wisdom, because ***“the natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; nor can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned.”***¹⁰

The knowledge of God and the corresponding life of a Christian according to that knowledge is not something that we create in ourselves. It comes to us, shines upon us, and influences us; just as the light of the sun comes from the heavens, warms us, and enables us to see clearly.

Therefore the Christian sings:¹¹

Renew me, O eternal Light,
And let my heart and soul be bright,
Illumined with the light of grace
That issues from Thy holy face.

As there can be no growth without the light of the sun, so there can be no spiritual growth unless the revelation of God's glory, as we have it in the inspired Word of God, shines upon us and is reflected by us, as by a mirror.

No growth is possible when the vision of Christ's glory is veiled. Paul bases the instruction in our text on an incident from the Old Testament with which the Christians at Corinth were familiar.

God had given the Ten Commandments to Israel through Moses, and while Moses was on Mount Sinai, Israel engaged in the idolatrous worship of the golden calf. In anger, Moses dashed the tablets containing God's Commandments to the ground, and they broke to fragments, just as Israel had broken them with their sinful deed.

At the intercession of Moses, God spared the people and commanded Moses to appear before Him on the Mountain that He might repeat His Commandments. When after forty days Moses again descended from Mount Sinai to deliver the testimony of God to the people, his face shone with a heavenly radiance, a reflection of God's glory.

Moses, the account relates, put a veil over his face. Whether this was to preserve the fading radiance on his face or because the people could not bear to look upon the heavenly radiance, or for both reasons, is not stated.

For purposes of illustration, Paul makes use of two points in that story. Firstly, the radiance on Moses' face was but a fading glory, which would soon pass away; and secondly, the veil hid God's glory, reflected on Moses' face, from the people.

Just so, declares Paul, every time the Old Testament is read, the veil which hides God's glory is upon the hearts of the people until they turn in faith to Christ.¹² When Christ takes away the veil, the glory of God is seen, and that glory shall not fade away.

As long as the veil is upon the heart, religion is to men only a set of laws that ought to be lived and ceremonies of worship that ought to be followed. It places men in bondage, it gives men no peace, it spells only sin and condemnation.

But when a man is converted to the Lord Jesus Christ, then the veil is lifted. The glory of the Lord shines upon him, and he reflects that glory. He sees in God's boundless love, which led His Son into death for the sins of the world, the forgiveness of his sins and the assurance of eternal life in God's unfading glory.

In Christ the Christian has freedom from the forces which compelled him to act contrary to God's holy Law; he has freedom from the curse which the transgression of the Law has brought upon him.

Direct access to God's glory alone changes us for the better. Through the Holy Spirit we have direct access to this unfading glory which we see. We see the Lord's glory with an "unveiled face." The veil of self-righteousness, of salvation by good works, of prejudice, of conceit in our human wisdom, and whatever else blinds man's mind to the things of God, is removed through faith in Christ, and the Holy Spirit shows us the unfading glory of the Lord.

That induces the Christian to lead a godly life in this world. Or, to state it differently, he lives in this world as one who expects to live in the eternal and unfading glory of God in eternity.

It has been said that when people live together in mutual respect, admiration, and love, they begin to think and act alike. This is often true of a happily married couple. Now the same thing, in a higher sense, is true of those who love God and have seen His glory.

They will, if they are truly converted, strive to become more Christ-like, putting on the new man, "***which after God is created in righteousness and true holiness.***"¹³ When the sinner sees with an unveiled face the glory of the Lord, he is "***transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord.***"

2. The Spiritual Growth Of A Christian Is A Progressive Change Into The Likeness Of Christ

The spiritual growth of a Christian, begun by a knowledge of Christ and His glory, is a progressive change into the likeness of Christ. He is transformed into the image of Christ. In a measure he reproduces the glory that shines in Christ. He shares in the glory which he sees and reflects.

No one is born in the likeness of Christ. Rather it is derived when the sinner stands with an unveiled mind that is not blinded, and is willing to perceive the glorious majesty of Christ as it has been revealed to us by the Holy Spirit.

Nor will a sinner grow into the likeness of Christ until he knows Christ by faith. He must first with an unveiled mind see the glorious majesty of Christ. How foolish it is to speak of a bursting through our shell and reaching forth to God! God comes to us and shows us His glory, if we only permit Christ to remove the veil.

Spiritual growth demands an inner change. When we speak of growth and progress in religion, we mean an inner change and a striving for perfection after the likeness of Christ. Again and again we hear sentiments to this effect: “*We need progress in religion; the Church ought to keep up with the progress of our century!*” But they speak of progress in the teachings of Christianity.

However, because we still teach the same things that Christ taught His disciples twenty centuries ago, and which the Lord gave us through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, they are ready to accuse us of clinging to something that belongs to the dark ages.

We all agree one hundred per cent that we need progress. But we do not need progress in the form of something new and modern to teach.

The teachings of the Bible are perfect, they cannot be improved, and they are useful in every age till the end of time. “Two times two equals four” is a fact that will always be up-to-date. And the teachings of the Bible are as much a fact as “two times two equals four.” They are as old as time itself and as modern as tomorrow, for they come from the mind of the eternal and omniscient God.

The interpretations and teachings which men sometimes base upon the Bible are not always the truth, for man is apt to err. But of the Bible itself, Jesus declares: “*Scripture cannot be broken.*”¹⁴ It is perfect, for it is of divine origin.

So there can be no progress in the teaching which the Bible contains. Where we need and must have progress is in ourselves. We need to grow in our understanding of God’s Word. There must be progress in living what we have learned to understand of God’s Word. When we see the sinless majesty of God and His boundless love for sinners, as the Bible mirrors these things to us, it must affect us — it cannot leave us unmoved!

When we see the glory of the Lord, we will be changed “*into the same image from glory to glory.*” Our growth has to do with sin. Our new man must become strong enough to drown the old Adam, the sinful flesh. Our heart must be renewed. Day by day our desires, thoughts, words, and deeds must become more Christ-like. We shall never reach perfection here on earth; but in the life to come, when we shall see the Lord face to face, we shall be like Him, perfect in righteousness and true holiness.

But for this perfection we must strive for now. Christianity is not a mere profession; it is a life. It is not something to be played at; it is an influence that should move us to do the thing that is in harmony with what we know and believe of Christ.

In our home, at our business, in our pleasures, amidst sorrow or good fortune, we ought to reflect, as did Moses, the glory of the Lord, and live as those who have been changed into that image.

A beautiful sentence in the Bible occurs in connection with the incident when Peter and John were tried by the rulers of the Jews because they proclaimed salvation in Jesus’ name. We read in Acts 4:13 that *they realised that they had been with Jesus.*

Spiritual growth is gradual. This change into the image of Christ is not something that is complete the moment the Christian has been converted. This change is a gradual growth in understanding and holiness of thought and life. We are changed “from glory to glory.” The Christian life is like a plant that grows and unfolds gradually and produces flowers and good fruit. A standstill in

Christianity is dangerous. It is the end of progress and the beginning of backsliding.

Spiritual growth is faith set into action. Let us not deceive ourselves and be lulled to indifference of living by feeling that it is enough that we have had confirmation instruction, that we endure listening to a sermon once a week, or that we contribute to the maintenance of the church. That may not be spiritual growth at all!

In fact, a man may be a theological professor, and still he may not have progressed very far in real Christianity. For progress comes only when our faith and knowledge, based on God's Word, has been set into action; and faith without works is dead.

You may know and confess that God will supply all your wants, that He will provide for you tomorrow; but until you have learned to stop worrying and actually depend on that in your attitude and in your life, you still have much progress to make.

You may know that it is wrong to gossip; but until you have mastered your tongue, you have not progressed far despite your knowledge. You may know all about the Saviour's death upon the Cross for your sins and how in Him we have full and free salvation; but until you trust in that and rejoice in it with your whole heart, you have much progress to make. The sermon is never over when the "**Amen**" is spoken. It must be translated into action, it must be lived.

The Lord does not force us to partake of His blessings. Rather, He beckons and invites us. He permits His glory to shine on us through His Word that He might warm, attract, and win us to His glory. Through Christ the veil is removed from our hearts. We see His glory, and His glory is reflected by us.

By His grace and power we grow more and more into the likeness of Jesus whose glory we see in God's Word. His love to us awakens our answering love to Him and to those for whom He also died and rose again. Only the vision of His glory will awaken in the heart the longing of heaven. Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep our hearts and minds, in Christ Jesus. Amen.

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- ¹ James 2:26
 - ² John 16:13
 - ³ John 14:26
 - ⁴ 2 Peter 1:21
 - ⁵ 1 Corinthians 2:13
 - ⁶ 1 Corinthians 12:3
 - ⁷ 2 Timothy 3:15
 - ⁸ Galatians 5:1
 - ⁹ Romans 8:21
 - ¹⁰ 1 Corinthians 2:14
 - ¹¹ Hymn 358 v1
 - ¹² Compare John 5:39-37
 - ¹³ Eph. 4:24
 - ¹⁴ John 10:35