

Growing in Grace

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For

David Woollin

*an incredibly faithful friend;
an effective preacher, with a huge servant heart;
a world-wide fellow-traveler and marketer of RHB books;
and an able, hard-working, and self-effacing assistant,
whom I appreciate much more than he knows.*

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Preface

Life's calamities can strip away the outward veneer of our false sources of security and reveal our true foundations—showing us what we're made of, what we truly rest upon, and how legitimate our source of hope is. Christians facing calamity ought to know from Scripture that God works through trials “for good to those who love God” (Rom. 8:28). God often uses trials for the “good” of waking us up from a distracted, intention-empty way of living and to turn us away from unworthy pursuits and ungodly affections, attitudes, and habits. These inward trials are employed by God, as the hymnist John Newton writes,

From self, and pride, to set thee free;
And break thy schemes of earthly joy,
That thou may'st find thy all in Me.¹

Realizing our deficits of spiritual grace can be shocking. We see a chasm between what we know as Christians and what we practice as Christians. But this chasm is not impassable, for the Holy Spirit, the Helper sent from the Father and the Son, works with and within us to traverse that gap. For the Christian, through all of life's circumstances and our changing conditions, growing in grace is our priority.

This is precisely the opposite priority of our present culture, whose antichristian ideologies and reckless embrace of all the world offers demands we grow in worldliness, not grace. As we're expected because of digital technology to race through life in fast-forward mode, the vast array of things we face each day that clamor for our immediate attention every moment can leave us at the end of each

1. John Newton, “I Asked the Lord That I Might Grow.”

day with a deficit of energy, attention, and perspective. What are we living for? What kind of people are we becoming?

We must grow in the grace of the God who purchased us and who keeps working in us to conform us to Christ. And God gives what He commands. He gives us means and tools to use that can truly, daily, bring us nearer to the ever-urgent goal of godliness. This book is one of those tools.

At the Puritan Reformed Conference held in August 2019, we heard talks from pastors, professors, biblical exegetes, and theologians who clearly displayed the grace-grounded imperative that Christians grow in grace. This book gathers those messages for the purpose of sharing their vital truths so that a wider audience may benefit from them.

Stephen Myers's introductory chapter, "Why Spiritual Growth Is Important," makes a convincing case for the need for spiritual growth by taking an honest look at the nature of our sin and the worthiness of pursuing holiness. If sin is the personal rejection of God and growing in grace is becoming more like Jesus, then this pursuit is worth it, no matter how many difficulties impede the way.

The rest of this book proceeds in three sections: scriptural studies, theological studies, and experiential studies. Rhett Dodson begins the scriptural section with a study titled, "Growing in Grace through the Psalms." Through an encouraging meditation on three psalms, Dodson invites readers to flourish in grace through the Scriptures (Psalm 1), suffering (Psalm 52), and the Sabbath (Psalm 92). Next, in "Growing in the Fear of the LORD," Daniel Timmer provides a biblical-theological overview of a virtue that is vital to the spiritual growth of all Christians. After Timmer skillfully shows how the theme develops in Deuteronomy and Job, he brings readers to see how the New Testament escalates the attitudes, priorities, and behaviors that make up the fear of the LORD in the Old Testament, and finally calls readers to develop the fear of the LORD according to patterns seen in the Scriptures he surveyed. Next, Joseph Pipa's message, "Growing in Repentance and Faith," gives a doctrinally rich study of the reciprocal blessings of repentance and faith through an exposition of James 4 and support from the Westminster Confession of Faith. In the next two chapters, "The Holy Spirit as the Author of Spiritual Growth" and "Growing in Personal Sanctification," Tom

Nettles walks readers through the doctrines of mortification (from 1 Peter 2:1–2) and vivification (from Phil. 2:12–13), respectively. Both of these messages will help readers see the double-sided aspect of growing in grace: that we flee from sin (mortification) because of the cleansing power of a new love (vivification), and that a whole-hearted love of righteousness (vivification) implies a deep-souled hatred of sin (mortification). The last message in this section is by Maarten Kuivenhoven and is titled “Growing in Heavenly-Mindedness.” It is based on Philippians 3:17–12, in which Paul declares that “our conversation [or citizenship] is in heaven; from whence also we look for the Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ” (v. 20). Kuivenhoven encourages believers to pursue a Christ-loving, cross-bearing, last-day seeking life of distinctive community.

The three theological studies that comprise the second section of the book are introduced by Joel Beeke’s message, titled “Growing in Personal Assurance of Faith.” This address presses the active pursuit of assurance by the ordinary use of the means of grace and lays out the many spiritual benefits it bears: assurance transforms trials, produces contentment, heightens holiness, and hastens heaven. Rob Ventura’s chapter, “Growing in Awareness of our Adoption by God” gives a systematic overview of the importance, nature, recipients, mediator, and blessings of spiritual adoption—helping believing readers ground their pursuit of holiness in their identity as children of God. Finally, Ian Macleod’s “Growing in Personal Evangelism” invites readers to learn evangelism from the life of Joseph by considering God’s sovereignty in evangelism, the heart-attitudes necessary for evangelism, and the role of Scripture.

The last section of practical, “experiential” messages begins with Greg Salazar’s message, titled “Growing in Christlikeness.” Salazar’s message will awaken in Christian readers a fresh love for Christ as it draws upon the insights of solid theologians, skillfully integrates Scripture, and makes vivid illustration and application of the topic. Next, in “Growing in Communion with the Triune God,” William VanDoodewaard encourages readers toward a greater desire for communion with God by showing how such communion relates to the triune nature of God, humanity’s creation and fall, God’s covenant, and union with Christ. We grow in communion by the Spirit-empowered use of the means of grace as we hope for the

fullness of the communion to come. Finally, in “Growing in Grace in Good Works,” Mark Kelderman makes a doctrinally grounded case for the importance of good works by addressing several important issues like the relationship between good works and grace, the quality of good works in light of our sin, and the sense in which good works will be rewarded.

May God use this book to encourage and equip His people for the urgent and worthy pursuit of growing in grace.

Why Spiritual Growth Is Important

Stephen G. Myers

If you were to scan through the table of contents for this book and consider the topics that will be covered, you almost certainly would have to say that I have the easiest job of all the contributors. In a manner of speaking, this chapter's task is to convince readers that spiritual growth is important. But you are likely reading this book because you *know* that spiritual growth is important. My job appears to be as difficult as selling ice cream to a child with a pocket full of money in the summertime. But I want to challenge you that perhaps spiritual growth is not only more important, but also infinitely more glorious, than you ever had considered. There is something about spiritual growth that makes it beautiful, and that ought to make it the great desire of your heart. There is something about growth in grace that is so filled with wonder and with glory that you can read an entire book about it and still not plumb its depths. To see growth in grace in this true, luminous glory, we need to consider two questions. First, what is sin? And second, what is growth in grace?

What Is Sin?

In Romans 5:12, the Scriptures tell us that “by one man sin entered into the world.” That “one man” through whom sin entered into the world is Adam. So, to answer the question “what is sin?” it is helpful to look at Adam because with him we see sin in its very origins.

When God first created Adam, He explicitly commanded Adam that he and Eve were not to eat of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, but in Genesis 3:1–5, the serpent comes to Eve and he entices her to eat. He tempts her to go against what God had commanded. At the moment Eve first lays eyes on the serpent, mankind is in an unbroken, unhindered, blessed relationship with God. God

has lavished untold blessings upon mankind—He has made man in His image; He has placed them in a lush garden; He has provided for their every need; and most wondrously of all, God has given mankind communion with Himself. At this point, Adam and Eve are God’s image-bearers, in God’s Paradise, under God’s intentional and constant care. And the most direct stipulation that God has given to man is that they not eat of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. But then the serpent tempts Eve to violate that command; to violate that condition upon which the continuation of man’s relationship with God rests. God has said, “To continue in your life of communion with Me, do not do *this*,” and the serpent has whispered, “Do it.”

In Genesis 3:6, Eve succumbs to the temptation: “And when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree to be desired to make one wise, she took of the fruit thereof, and did eat, and gave also unto her husband with her; and he did eat.” Here, the Scriptures hold out the very depths of sin’s obscenity. Notice in verse 6 that Adam evidently was right there with Eve. Verse 6 says that Eve “gave also unto her husband *with her*; and he did eat.” Adam was there, watching Eve succumb to temptation, standing by as she ate. Adam’s culpability is crushing. But it gets worse. In the New Testament, in 1 Timothy 2:14, the apostle Paul is reflecting on this sickening scene, and he writes that “Adam was not deceived, but the woman, being deceived, fell into temptation.” Notice what he says—“Adam was not deceived.” When Eve ate the fruit, she did it under the shroud of deception. When Adam ate the fruit, he was not deceived: he sinned with his eyes wide open. He knew what he was doing. The man who brought sin and death and destruction into the world did it knowing that he was acting in flagrant disobedience to his creator. Let that sink in. Adam knew that the perpetuation of his fellowship with God depended on his perfect and personal obedience to God’s command. Adam may not have grasped everything, but he knew that. If Adam ate of the fruit of the tree, his relationship with God as he then knew it would end. In a very real sense, Adam had two choices: God or disobedience. Adam could have one or the other, but not both. And Adam chose disobedience. Remember 1 Timothy 2:14. Adam “was not deceived.” He willingly chose to reject God.

When we think of sin, we are so prone to see it as a rejection of God's law, or disobedience against God's command. Certainly, those things are true. But also—and underlying everything else—sin is a rejection of *God Himself*. In Genesis 3, Adam is in relationship with God. And Adam knows that if he eats of the fruit of the tree, he will forfeit his relationship with God. When Adam eats of the tree, he is not just rejecting God's command; he is rejecting the God who holds out that command as a condition of fellowship with Himself. In Adam's knowing sin, we see sin for what it is. It is the personal rejection—the treasonous betrayal—of God Himself.

This intensely personal, relational element to sin runs throughout Scripture. One of the most succinct characterizations of sin that we receive in the New Testament comes in 1 John 3:4—“Whosoever committeth sin transgresseth also the law: for sin is the transgression of the law.” Here, the Authorized Version is using several English words—“the transgression of the law”—to translate what is one single word in the Greek that the apostle John used—*anomia*. John writes that sin is *anomia*. Sometimes Greek can be as confusing as the day is long, but other times, it can be uncomfortably clear. The Greek word *nomos* (or here, *nomia*) means law. And in Greek, if you place an alpha—Greek's version of the letter “a”—in front of a word, it means, essentially, the opposite of that word. That is what John has done here. He has put an *alpha* (a Greek letter “a”) in front of “law.” And in doing so, John is telling us that sin is the opposite of law. Sin is “anti-law.” This always has been the Reformed understanding. Think about question 14 of the Westminster Shorter Catechism: “What is sin?” The answer is, “Sin is any want of conformity unto, or transgression of, the law of God.” Sin always has been understood as being what the law is not. Sin is not just failure to meet the law; it is opposition to the law. It is not just a falling short; it is a railing against. Sin is anti-law.

If sin is anti-law, that begs a question—what is the law? What is the law in opposition to which sin finds its definition? Jesus gives us an answer. In Matthew 22:36–40, a Pharisee lawyer approaches Jesus and asks Him what the “great commandment in the law” was. Now, you have to realize what this question means. In the opinion of the Pharisees and others, there was, in the whole vast sweep of the law, a “great commandment.” And this one great commandment

was seen as summarizing and condensing all of the law. If you kept this one commandment, you would end up keeping all of the commandments, because this one, great commandment was the beating heart of the whole thing. And so this Pharisee asks Jesus what that great commandment was—what one law gives the soul of it all. And what does Jesus say? In Matthew 22:37–38, Jesus says: “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment.” There Jesus quotes Deuteronomy 6:5 and says that it is the very center of the law. It is the hook on which the whole law hangs. And what Deuteronomy 6:5 says is clear enough. God’s people are to love Him with all that they have and all that they are. The affections of their hearts, the longings of their souls, the thoughts of their minds, every part of who they are is to be consumed with, and directed toward, the love of God. Love for God Almighty is to seep down into every area of their lives, every corner of their experience. How they feel, what they do, what they think—all is to be pervaded by, and overflowing with, love for God. Everything in life is to be love for God. Jesus says that this whole-souled embrace of and love for God is what the law is about. It is nestled at the very core of what the law is. And sin, John tells us in 1 John 3:4, is the opposite. Sin is anti-law. If the law is love of God, sin is hatred of God. If the law is the embrace of God, sin is the rejection of God. If the law is having God at the center of it all, sin is wanting Him gone. The law, Jesus tells us, is the loving embrace of God. Sin—anti-law—is the hate-swollen rejection of God.

Let your heart sit down with that for a moment. It is so easy to take sin lightly. And to take it lightly by somehow abstracting it from our love for God. We want to say that we love God, but in this one area, in this one thing, we just fudge on His law a little bit. Do not believe that lie that the evil one tells. When you speak, or when you think, without love and without compassion for your brothers and sisters in Christ; when you covet the things, or the life, that God has given to others rather than what He has given to you; when you seek to find rest in your deeds—in your faith, in your humility—rather than resting in the Jesus whose yoke is easy and whose burden is light and who loves to gather the weak to Himself; when you lust with your eyes, and you murder with your tongue, and you worship an idol that looks an awful lot like you, no matter what lies you

might be told—you are not just violating some abstract standard. You are living out the rejection of God. As one whom He has loved; as one whom the Father has given to the Son, and whom the Son has washed with His own blood, and whom the Spirit has made alive. As one whom God has adopted as His own, you are living as one who hates Him. Brothers and sisters, you want no part of sin. Not even *that* sin. That particular, choice sin that is nestled in your heart; that sin that is so central to your understanding of yourself that you cannot fathom laying it down; that one sin to which you think you can cling alongside a life of loving God because that sin seems to be just part of who you are; even *that* sin—if you only will see it for what it is—you will want no part of it. Because sin is the hate-drenched rejection of God.

What Is Growth in Grace?

Having considered our first question, what sin is, the second question is “What is growth in grace?” Or, to speak more technically, “What is sanctification?”

To gain an understanding of what sanctification is, there are a range of places one could look in the Scriptures, but for our purposes, we will focus attention on 1 Thessalonians 4:1–8:

Furthermore then we beseech you, brethren, and exhort you by the Lord Jesus, that as ye have received of us how ye ought to walk and to please God, so ye would abound more and more. For ye know what commandments we gave you by the Lord Jesus. For this is the will of God, even your sanctification, that ye should abstain from fornication: that every one of you should know how to possess his vessel in sanctification and honour; not in the lust of concupiscence, even as the Gentiles which know not God: that no man go beyond and defraud his brother in any matter: because that the Lord is the avenger of all such, as we also have forewarned you and testified. For God hath not called us unto uncleanness, but unto holiness. He therefore that despiseth, despiseth not man, but God, who hath also given unto us His Holy Spirit.

Clearly, Paul here is dealing with sanctification. He makes this explicit in verse 3: “For this is the will of God, even your *sanctification*.” And again, in verse 7, he writes, “For God hath not called us unto uncleanness, but unto *holiness*.” In dealing here with sanctification,

Paul brings out several of sanctification's central characteristics, each of which builds upon the other to help us see something critically important.

First, as verse 1 demonstrates, sanctification is *a relentless pursuit*. In the first three chapters of 1 Thessalonians, it is clear that the church in Thessalonica—the men, women, and children to whom Paul first was writing this letter—was what many today would call a “good church” populated by “good people.” In chapter 1, Paul had praised the Thessalonians for their good example to others. In chapter 3, Paul had commended their faith and their love. In 3:7, Paul even had written that he, personally, was comforted by the faith of the Thessalonians. In some of his letters, Paul obviously is writing to churches who are on the brink; who are in peril of falling into deep error. Other times, he writes to churches that have fallen into flagrant sin and rebellion. Thessalonica was not one of those churches. When Paul hears of the love and the faith of the Thessalonians, he is comforted. But look again at what Paul writes in 4:1: “Furthermore then we beseech you, brethren, and exhort you by the Lord Jesus, that as ye have received of us how ye ought to walk and to please God, so ye would abound more and more.” Paul charges the Thessalonians to press forward, to reject any sort of complacency with their spiritual state, and to strive to do even better—to abound more and more. Paul wants the Thessalonians to seek after greater holiness, greater obedience, and more growth in grace. As Paul makes very clear in verse 1, the manner of life that he had pressed on the Thessalonians was pleasing to God; therefore, abounding more and more in that manner of life was to abound in pleasing God. To these exemplary Christians living exemplary lives, Paul says, “what pleases God is for you to grow; to get stronger in your faith and in the living out of that faith.” God is pleased with holiness in His people; He delights in the holiness of His people. But that holiness of His people in this world is never static. The holiness and the sanctification that pleases God is dynamic; it is growing; it is abounding more and more. It is a sanctification that makes exemplary people even more exemplary. It is a relentless pursuit.

Second, this sanctification is *a divinely enabled pursuit*. Paul makes that clear throughout his letter to the Thessalonian Christians. Just before the passage in question, in 3:11–13, Paul prays for God to

sanctify the Thessalonians. At the close of his letter, in 5:23–24, Paul again prays and makes clear that it is the power of God alone that is able to sanctify His people and make them holy. God does not leave His people to their own inadequate devices and command them to be holy. Rather, God works in His people and through His people to make them holy. God’s people must labor and they must struggle to be holy, but that struggle is a struggle that they undertake in and through God’s power. In all of its relentlessness, sanctification is a divinely enabled pursuit.

Third, we see that sanctification seeks after *conformity to God’s Word*. In verse 1, Paul “beseeches” and “exhorts” the Thessalonians to abound more and more in that which they had received from him, and in verse 2, Paul reiterates what the Thessalonians already know—that these “commandments” that he and Silas had given to them came from Jesus. They were commandments given “by the Lord Jesus.” In their perpetual crescendo of obedience, the Thessalonians are to be bringing their lives more and more into conformity with the Word and the command of Christ—His desires becoming their desires; their dislikes becoming His dislikes; their wills becoming more aligned with His; their every action and every thought and every word bringing Him delight.

That continual conformity to Christ’s command, in time, points to the final thing that is necessary to see in this passage. Sanctification makes you *more like Jesus*. Paul makes this point with real emphasis in verses 7–8. Throughout the passage, Paul has been calling the Thessalonians to ever more abounding sanctification; and he has been doing that, as he writes in verse 7, because “God hath not called us unto uncleanness, but unto holiness.” The ever-abounding conformity to God’s Word—the sanctification—to which God is calling these Thessalonian Christians will issue forth in holiness. And then, at the very close of verse 8, Paul speaks of God as the one “who hath also given unto us his Holy Spirit.” There is a very typical way in which the New Testament refers to the Holy Spirit. For example, at the close of 2 Corinthians, Paul refers to the fellowship of “the Holy Spirit” (*tou hagiou pneumatos*). The words in the Greek flow just as they do in the English—the Holy Spirit. That is not the way that Paul refers to the Holy Spirit in 2 Thessalonians 4:8. Here, Paul writes, literally, “His Spirit, the Holy One” (*to pneuma autou to hagion*). Paul is

drawing focused attention to the fact that the Spirit God gives to His people is holy. He is the *Holy Spirit*. When God's people seek after holiness (v. 7), they are becoming more like the outpoured Spirit who is holy (v. 8). In chasing rabidly after holiness, Christians are not pursuing some abstract ideal of obedience or merit. We are warring against the flesh to become more like God; to be holy just as the Spirit of God is holy. Holiness is not conformity to a list of expectations or rules or norms. Holiness is "God-likeness."

Paul makes that point in 1 Thessalonians. John makes the same point in 1 John 2:28–3:3. John writes,

And now, little children, abide in him; that, when he shall appear, we may have confidence, and not be ashamed before him at his coming. If ye know that he is righteous, ye know that every one that doeth righteousness is born of him. Behold, what manner of love the Father hath bestowed upon us, that we should be called the sons of God: therefore the world knoweth us not, because it knew him not. Beloved, now are we the sons of God, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be: but we know that, when he shall appear, we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is. And every man that has this hope in him purifieth himself, even as he is pure.

In verse 29, John calls his readers to "do righteousness." This is sanctification—the doing of righteousness. John is exhorting his readers to sanctification. In the very next verse, 3:1, John asserts that Christians, in their righteousness, will be as unknown and as misunderstood by the world as Jesus was. Then in verse 2 we read that in this seeking after righteousness, Christians are on a course that will terminate in their being like Jesus at His revelation at the end, when history collapses. But they do not just wait idly for that day. Rather, as John writes in verse 3, when Christians have that future certainty in themselves, they now, today, purify themselves. They purify themselves because Jesus is pure. Christians seek after in their own lives what they see in their Redeemer.

Consider one more Scripture. In Matthew 5:48, Jesus makes a staggering claim. At that point in Matthew, Jesus is in the midst of His Sermon on the Mount, and He just has come to the conclusion of the part of that Sermon known as the Six Antitheses. In the Six Antitheses, Jesus says, six times, "Ye have heard it said...but I say

unto you.” Each of those times, Jesus takes a way in which the law was being externalized by the Pharisees and others and shows how that law actually spoke to the heart. It is in this section, for example, where Jesus shows that the sixth commandment does not just forbid physical murder, but it also condemns speaking harsh words against your neighbor, slaying your neighbor with your tongue. Jesus has come to the end of this portion of His sermon, where He has taken the law and showed how radically it spoke to the whole of a person—how the law is concerned not just with what you do, but also with what you say, think, and feel. Jesus has so radically internalized the law, and then, after pressing His people to this high calling of full-orbed obedience, Jesus says, “Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect” (Matt. 5:48). When God’s people render obedience to His law, not only externally, but internally; when God’s people live lives of sanctification and obedience and growth in grace, Jesus says that they are perfect—perfect with a perfection that is analogous to the Father’s own perfection. They are perfect even as He is perfect. Sanctification makes you holy as God the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost are holy. It is God-likeness. Now, obviously, you do not become God-like in any sort of way, but His glory and His holiness are seen in you. There is something profoundly Trinitarian at work here. There is not the space at present even to begin to explore those mysteries, but as Colossians 2:9 reveals, the fulness of the Godhead dwells bodily in Jesus. In Jesus, we see the holiness of the triune God, and as we grow in grace, we become more like Jesus. Make it personal. Read these words as speaking to you and of you. When you grow in grace, you become more like Jesus. In fact, that is what sanctification is. Sanctification is God’s elect, by the power of the Spirit, being conformed to the image of the Son. Does your heart not long for that?

Conclusion

We said at the outset that we wanted to answer two questions—“What is sin?” and “What is growth in grace?” Hopefully, both of those questions have had some answer. Sin is the personal rejection of God. Growing in grace is becoming more like Jesus. This ought to show you the importance of growing in grace. Growing in grace is not easy. Laying down your sin and taking up righteousness—not

only externally, but internally, too—is hard. It is the protracted, relentless process of going from being one who rejects God to being one who is like God’s Son. It is hard. But we are aided in that struggle by understanding things rightly; by having what Romans 12:2 describes as a “renewed mind.” We tend to think of sanctification as following certain rules, meeting a certain standard, living up to certain expectations and norms. We tend to think of sanctification and growth in grace as being “good enough” to fit in. In some cases, we think of sanctification as little more than a life-long, slow-motion process of submitting ourselves to standards that we never approved anyway. If that is how you understand growth in grace, you will grow weary. Especially when it becomes hard. But when we see the wondrous truth that the Scripture sets before us; when we see that the sin harbored in our hearts really is a rejection of God; and when we see that sanctification is your becoming more like Jesus, it makes the struggle radiant. It changes everything. It makes you desperately want to know what the following chapters have to tell you.

I am far from holy. I have much growing in grace to do. If you knew me, you would know that. But I want to be sanctified. I want to grow in grace—not because I am afraid of hell, and not because I want the admiration of anyone reading this book. I want to grow in grace because I love Jesus and I want desperately to be like Him. I want people to look at me and be reminded of the Savior whom I love more than I love my next breath. That is why I want to grow in grace. That is why you ought to want to grow in grace. Growth in grace is important because it takes those who once were enemies of God and it makes them like Jesus. That is the privilege that lies on the far side of the struggle. Not the completion of a checklist of rules, but likeness to a person—likeness to Jesus. Is that important? Brothers and sisters...it is everything.