

A GROWING SOUL

Sermon preached before the Southern Baptist Convention, Evening session, May 17, 1916, Asheville, North Carolina, by Charles W. Daniel, First Baptist Church, Atlanta, Georgia.

Text: "Let us, therefore, as many as are perfect, be thus minded" (Phil. 3:15).

In the third chapter of Philippians, we see not the great preacher declaring the glory of his message, nor the Christian statesman unfolding his plans for a world-conquest on behalf of Christ, but Paul, the disciple of Jesus, revealing the ground of his hope and the principles upon which he was ordering his life. He lays bare the very secrets of his heart in quite the most charming piece of spiritual autobiography to be found anywhere.

The purpose of this revelation is manifest. He is seeking, thereby, to awaken his fellow-believer to a livelier sense of the duty of progress in the Christian life. To Paul the objective facts of the Christian revelation were not more definite and trustworthy than the spiritual attitudes which condition the acceptance of the gospel, and which mark the confidence, therefore, he appeals to his own example, and says: "Let us, therefore, as many as are perfect, be thus minded."

It is necessary to remember that in the use of the word "perfect," the Apostle does not refer to moral excellence, but to the maturity and soundness of their views of the gospel. The contrast is with the "Judaizers," that influential body of Jewish believers who sought to interpret Christianity in terms of Judaism, and to impose upon all believers, as necessary to salvation, the rites and ceremonies of the fathers. The occasion of this conflict has long since passed, but the principles involved appear in every generation. In one form or another the issue is always present as to whether the Christian religion shall

be interpreted in terms of law or grace, of work or faith, of flesh or spirit. "We are the true circumcision," says the Apostle, "who worship by the Spirit of God, and glory in Christ Jesus, and have not trust in the flesh."

To those who hold to the spiritual interpretation of Christianity, the appeal for spiritual progress comes with peculiar force, because of the presence of two dangerous tendencies that are constantly at work. In the first place, there is the temptation to allow the religious life to express itself as a series of negations. A touch of irony is in the world, when the Apostle says, "Let us, therefore, as man as are 'perfect!'" They were liable to fall into the peril of resting satisfied that they were not as others. Error must be exposed; wrong-doers must be denounced; heresies must be avoided; but faithfulness in all these things cannot compensate for the failure to work out our own salvation with fear and trembling. On the other hand, there is the constant temptation that those who rejoice in their freedom from the law shall permit their liberty to degenerate into license. It is of such people the Apostle speaks when he says, "For many walk of whom I have told you often, and now tell you even weeping, that they are the enemies of the cross of Christ, whose end is perdition, whose God is their belly, and whose glory is in their shame, who mind earthly things. Men may assent to the cross as a doctrine, and discredit it by a refusal to accept it as an experience. They may rejoice in their rejection of the sacramental value of foods and fasts, and yet make a god of their own appetites. They may claim that their citizenship is in heaven, while their souls are mundane and grovelling. Their glory is their shame. Their end is perdition.

Loyalty to the truth is best shown by living it. Christianity's best defense is a Christian. Emerson's phrase, "What you are speaks so loud, I cannot hear what you say," is only a striking expression of

the vital truth that the effectiveness of the testimony of an individual or people is measured by the amount of character back of it. Not only the perils of pride and worldliness, but also the preciousness of the truth we hold, the right of the gospel to adequate defense against all critics, and the success of our witness to Christ, from Jerusalem to the uttermost part of the earth, challenge our attention today as never before, and call us back to the fundamental task of translating more worthily into character and conduct the principles we hold dear.

Accepting the invitation of one of "the least of all the saints," let us go into the laboratory of his Christian experience, and discover, if we can, the permanent characteristics of a growing soul.

THE LAW OF THE WALK

The first sign of a growing soul, that we find, is the ability to reaffirm in the present the first decision for Christ. It is useless to go into a consideration of the matter of growth, unless there is life to begin with. Paul gives in one sentence the story of his conversion, "But what things were gain to me, these have I counted loss for Christ." These words put us at once upon the Damascus road, and all the significant incidents of that wonderful hour come to mind. Face to face with Jesus, he renounced all the advantages of birth and position, and repudiated all the merit of his personal achievements. Without reserve, he avowed his new allegiance. The risen Christ was forevermore enthroned in his heart as Saviour and Lord. No one can do less than that and be a Christian in any real sense. No one can do more than that.

Now, after the lapse of years, with their sunshine and shadows, victories and defeats, joys and sorrow, contemplating from his prison house in Rome the memories of that eventful day, he affirms now what

he said then, "Yea, doubtless, and I count (present tense) all things to be loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord." When he made his calculation of profit and loss at the beginning, it was a venture of faith. Now, after the experience of having actually lost all things, his first decision stands. For fear that some one might think there was touch of pride in the recital of the losses of his life in order to follow Christ, he adds that the things, which he once regarded as gain, he now accounts as but the refuse of the streets. The excellency of the knowledge of Christ has forever changed his estimate of values,

As ye have received Christ Jesus the Lord, so also walk ye in him." This is the law of the walk. Repentance and faith are terms which more correctly define attitudes than acts of the soul. To say the least, they are acts which determine permanent attitudes. In a growing soul, the passing of the years results only in deepening conviction of sin, more determined rejection of sin's dominion, and a more childlike dependence upon the grace of God, made known to us in Christ Jesus. In the soul's first saving knowledge of the Lord, faith is born, hope is born, love is born. It is by these things we live. These are the things which abide.

Some are not able to say now what they said when they first accepted the Lord. The blight of unfriendly criticism has touched them. The shock of perplexing providences has disturbed them. ~~The shock of perplexing~~ ~~perplexing~~ The subtle atmosphere of worldliness has enveloped them. They may affect an air of satisfaction that they have outgrown what they call the unreasoned emotions of their youth or that they have cast off the bonds into which they were unduly urged by solicitous friends. Making due allowance for possible mistakes, one can affirm

with confidence that they were truer to themselves and to the truth than, than they are now in their intellectual conceit and waywardness of will. Happy is the man who can sing with the spirit and understanding:

"O, happy day, that fixed my choice
On thee, my Saviour and my God;
Will may this glowing heart rejoice,
And tell its raptures all abroad."

One ought never to sing that stanza, however, without including another, that is too frequently omitted from the hymnbooks:

"High heaven, that heard that solemn vow
That now renewed shall daily hear,
Till in life's latest hour I bow,
And bless in death a bond so dear."

THE GRASP OF CHRIST

The next indication of a growing soul is found in the words, "I press on, if so be that I may lay hold on that for which also I was laid hold on by Christ Jesus." The Apostle confesses to an abiding that Christ has a plan for his life. This conviction is transparent in all that he said and did. He ran not as those who run uncertainly. He fought not as those who beat the air. It is easy for us to believe that Christ has a plan for the heroic life of such a man as Paul. It is not so easy to be persuaded that he has a purpose for ours. Paul would remind us that the proof we need, that it is so in our case, is to be found in the fact of our salvation. Christ's redemption is always purposeful.

If one were to attempt an explanation for the vast majority of failures on the part of young men and women to make a success of their earthly careers, they would not be charged to incompetency, to lack of opportunity, or to viciousness, but to aimlessness. To have no goal, to set the hands to no definite task is to leave oneself adrift on the sea of time, tossed by every wind, and destined to inevitable de-

struction. Certainly the failures in the Christian life of so many about us are due to this fact. Here, too, we may find the secret of the poor dying rate at which many of our churches are living. Where there is no vision the people perish.

Paul prays for the Ephesians that the eyes of their hearts may be opened, that they might know, what is the hope of his calling, what is the riches of the glory of his inheritance in the saints, and what is the exceeding greatness of his power toward us who believe. To know what God desires and expects as a result of his having called us into the fellowship of his Son, to know how he is enriched when his children measure up to his hope concerning them, and to know the measureless power that is available for us to that end, is to be supplied with direction, inspiration, and certainty for the Christian career.

Many confess to serious difficulty in determining what the will of God is in any given circumstance. I know of no better answer than that given by Dr. F. B. Meyer some years ago. He said that there is in the British Isles a certain harbor which is difficult of access. It is necessary for the captain of a vessel, wishing to enter port, to get three of the harbor lights in a line before him, and with this done he can come safely in. Likewise, when the Bible, our conscience, and the circumstances in which we are placed are all in accord, we may be sure that we are in the will of God, and may go forward confidently.

When full allowance is made for the difficulty of believing that there is a plan for one's life, and for the problem of finding out the will of God in a given case, perhaps the greatest difficulty of all is in bringing one's self to an active obedience to the duty that

lies next at hand, and about which there is no trace of doubt. The will to do is the condition of knowing. The light which led the Israelites out of Egypt was given for guidance and not for speculation. No fact of Christian experience is more certain than, that when we walk in the light we have, God graciously gives more light. The path of the just is as the dawning light, which grows brighter and brighter until the full-grown day.

Paul exhorts the Colossians (3:15): "Let the peace of God rule in your hearts, to which ye are called in one body." He addresses the Romans (1:7): "Beloved of God, called to be saints." He assures the Corinthians (1:1-9) that "God is faithful, by whom ye were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord." What a summons to every child of God! Called to the peace of God, let us have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Called to be saints, let us walk as becometh saints. Called into the fellowship of his Son, let us bear in our bodies that the brand-marks of Jesus. I follow after, I press on, if so be that I may lay hold on that for which also I was laid hold on by Christ Jesus. The growing Christian is one who who responds to the grasp of Christ by stretching forth eager hands to lay hold on that for which he was seized.

THE EXHAUSTLESS IDEAL

Another mark of a growing soul appears in the increasing realization of unattained ideals. Note how it is expressed: "Brethren I do not account myself to have laid hold of it." The calls of the world and of the flesh are "downward" callings, but the call of God is an "high" calling, or as the margin of the American revision puts it, "an upward" calling. Beyond the summit of every attainment of character or achievement of service, Paul saw other heights to be scaled.

Paul's ideal had all the definiteness and all the exhaustlessness of Jesus. Hear him: "That I may gain Christ, and be found in him, not having my own righteousness, which is of the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God through faith; that I may know him, and the power of his resurrection, and the fellowship of his sufferings, becoming conformed to his death, if by any means I may attain to the resurrection from the dead." Christ died for our sins and was raised again for our justification. Therein is revealed the righteousness which from God through faith. It is at once the power for our salvation and the pattern for our life. Faith cannot appropriate the power and reject the pattern. To this pattern we are committed by our holy baptism, for we have been buried with him by baptism into death, that like as Christ was raised from the dead ~~by~~ by the glory of the Father, even so, we also should walk in newness of life. The fellowship of his sufferings, even unto death! The power of his resurrection! I account not myself to have laid hold of it.

In the light of that confession, what must we think of the state of those who are frequently heard to say, "I have done my share," or "I am going to step aside and let somebody else carry the load?" When one comes to think that he is good enough or has done enough, then all progress in character and service ceases. The gaze of such people is no longer upward but horizontal. Then men begin to compare themselves with themselves, and their piety becomes conventional and their service perfunctory.

Our own hearts admonish us to acknowledge that it is not always easy to maintain our lives upon the high plane of things spiritual.

Youthful lusts have power to lay waste the soul. In middle age, the romance and the aspirations are apt to go out of the life, and one is tempted to settle down to sensuous ease and to a cynical opinion of the enthusiasms of those who would be in a better day. In old age, the tendency is to live in the past and to become pessimistic about the future. The Psalmist tells us that there is an arrow that flieth by day, a pestilence that walketh in darkness, and destruction that wasteth at noon day. "I keep my body under the execution's ax flashed before him, and the sight of the awaiting crown greeted him, did he every say: "I have finished my course."

"Ne'er think the victory won,
 Not lay thine armor down,
 The work of faith will not be done,
 Till thou obtain thy crown."

THE ONE THING TO DO

A further mark of a growing soul is diligence in the use of present opportunities. This is the message in the familiar, but always arresting, metaphor: "Forgetting the things behind, and reaching forth to the things before, I press on toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus."

Paul thinks of himself as a runner, perhaps at the Isthmian games. He started his race long ago. The goal has not yet been reached. What shall he do? There is but one thing to do, and that is, press on. Make the next stride count for its full value. The use of his feet is conditioned by the state of his mind. He, therefore, forgets the things behind and reaches forth to the things which are before.

Two ways of measuring progress in the Christian life are suggested by this figure: One is, to look back to see how far you have come; the other is, to fix the eye upon the goal to see how far you have

to go. When progress is measured by looking back, speed is slackened, time is wasted, and the prize will be lost. Spiritual progress can be safely measured only by the forward look. Others may note as they please the splendid distance you have come, but for you to dwell on the sin you have vanquished, the service you have rendered, the money you have given, the good you have done, you are likely to forget the goal, become boastful of your achievements, and add one more to the population of the modern Pharisees.

The only opportunity for living the Christian life and for rendering Christian service is here and now. The past was gone. The future has not come. If we are unwilling to do Christ's will where we are, we cannot do it at all. Frequently the compliant is heard: "If I only lived somewhere else, or had different conditions, I would so much for the Lord." Let the complaint be granted. The fact remains that they cannot be elsewhere than they are. If they are failing here and now, the law of probabilities argues, that they would not likely serve him in another location and under other conditions.

"Just where you stand in the conflict,
 There is your place!
 Just where you think you are useless,
 Hide not your face;
 God placed you there for a purpose,
 Whate'er it may be;
 Think he has chosen you for it,
 Work loyally."

Some preacher, perhaps, is discontented with his field. Paul had had better fields of labor than his present location, living in a hired house and chained to a Roman soldier. I do not doubt for a moment that he hailed with delight the call that brought this release after a residence in Rome for two years. In the meantime, he says: "I am pressing on." He had learned the secret that in whatsoever state he was, therewith to be content. He had learned how to hold himself

together and not "blow" up.

Knowing the restless energy with which he traversed continents, the power with which he preached the gospel to multitudes in Asia and Europe, and the wondrous success he had in gathering together in orderly church life great companies of believers and in leading them out into co-operative efforts, we marvel that his soul does not chafe under the limitation of his prison life. The man, whose reach is toward the goal, is, however, never without an opportunity. Attracted by the novelty of his prison pulpit, people gathered around him and heard him preach the kingdom of God and teach the things concerning the Lord Jesus Christ. He assures us that the things which had happened unto him, had turned out rather unto the furtherance of the gospel. His brethren had been made bolder by his bonds. He rejoiced that Christ had been more extensively preached, even though some had done so through envy and strife, thinking to add affliction to his bonds. Concerned for his children in the gospel in other places, he finds time to pour out his soul to them in the matchless epistles to the Philippians, the Ephesians, and the Colossians. The conscience of a ~~run-a-way~~ slave aroused, Paul leads Onesimus to Christ, and send him back to his master, Philemon at Colosse, with a letter that carries a breath of heaven in it to soothe and heal the domestic and social disorders of mankind. Not much opportunity, you say? But using the opportunity he had, that in concluding his letter to the Philippians he was able to say: "All the saints salute you, especially they who are of Caesar's household."

In these ways, Paul the Christian, tells us the secret of the remarkable fact in his life, that though the outward man was decaying, yet the inward man was being renewed day by day.

Let us as Baptists be thus minded. We stand pledged by our principles, our spirit, and our purposes to Horace Bushnell's dictum, that

"The soul of all improvement is the improvement of the soul."

The perpetuity of our principles depends upon their preservation, not in dogmatic creeds, not in great institutions, but in their embodiment in the life and character of our people, for "the faith was once for all delivered to the saints."

The value of our doctrines for our fellow men can be established only in the measure in which we give a practical demonstration of their power to produce in us Christlike men and women.

The efficiency of our enterprises is conditioned upon the extent to which our preachers and people are growing in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

The worth and the power of our institutions, local and general, missionary, educational, and benevolent, are in proportion as they are animated by the mind and passion of Christ.

Our safeguard against the seductions of a false sentimentalism and the intimidations of the ecclesiastically ambitious is in our maintenance of one loyalty, our loyalty to Christ, and in our steadfastness in one purpose, that we may finish our course with joy and the ministry which we have received of the Lord Jesus.

"For our citizenship is in heaven; whence also we wait for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ; who shall fashion anew the body of our humiliation, that it may be conformed to the body of his glory, according to the working whereby he is able to subject all things unto himself."