

Peter's Epistles #14

Faith and Spiritual Growth

(also available on-line at Ichthys.com)
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Review: The process of spiritual growth, though simple in design, is a demanding one. It requires that we seek out and *listen* to God's Word, that we *believe* His truth, that we *live* our lives by that truth, and that we embrace the mission of His Church and *help* others according to the spiritual gifts we have been given.

"*Listening*", covered in our last lesson, is the first step in this process. Listening emphasizes the principle that we are responsible to initiate spiritual growth by dedicating ourselves to the Bible and to sound Bible teaching – not to surrender our volition, nor to suspend our judgment, but to seek out and select an environment of study and worship in which we may grow.

We now move on to the second step in the process of spiritual growth, "*believing*". This is perhaps the most critical phase in our struggle to build up our "inner man", because it usually turns out to be the "make or break" phase in the spiritual development of most believers. We shall tackle our subject by examining seven principles explaining the process of growth through faith.

II. Believing:

(1) There is no growth without faith:

But the word they heard did not profit them, for it was not mixed with faith in them, though they heard it.
Hebrews 4:2

Mere exposure to the Bible and to biblical teaching are not sufficient to produce spiritual growth in and of themselves. Unless the Word of God is "mixed with faith" in our hearts, the mere acquisition of knowledge will not "edify" us (Eph.4:16). To grow, we need more. We need faith. True spiritual growth requires not only that we *receive* the teachings of the Word of God, but also that we *believe* them.

Making God's Word a part of the "working capital" deposited in the storehouse of our souls necessitates that we take His precious truth into our hearts completely and unreservedly, for unless we believe the teachings of the Bible, we will not be able to lean on them in times of trouble and temptation; we will have built our spiritual house "on sand" (Matt.7:24-27). Only by believing it does a principle of biblical truth become intrinsically our own; only by believing

them do the essential elements of God's knowledge become, in any true sense, understandable to us and usable by us; only by believing God's message do the building blocks of that message begin to form a secure foundation in our hearts capable of withstanding the ferocious daily onslaught of the world, the flesh, and the devil (1Pet.5:8-9). To "fight the good fight" of the Christian life we need the proper ammunition in our hearts: the truth of God's Word held fast by faith.

(2) Faith means trusting God:

Now [Abraham] trusted in the Lord, and [the Lord] considered him righteous because of it.

Genesis 15:6

Faith must have a worthwhile object to have any real meaning. To commence the Christian life – the life of faith – the worthy object in whom we put our trust is the Lord Jesus Christ ("Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved," Acts 16:31). Faith begins with this one small act of trust in God. God promises us eternal life if we but accept His Son, Jesus Christ. We in turn believe or put our faith in Jesus. Our trusting in God and His promise to us is the faith that saves us by God's grace (Eph.2:8-9).

As it was at salvation, so it is in the process of spiritual growth – with one important exception. We enter the family of God in the blink of an eye through one simple act of trust in God's Son. But to progress spiritually, our tiny mustard seed of faith must continue to grow as God nurtures and prunes it throughout our life on this earth. When the trials of this life rush headlong to meet us, we must be ever ready to apply our faith in the very same way we did when we accepted Jesus Christ as our savior. We must be ready to meet these fiery barbs with our shield of faith (Eph.6:16). In short, we must be ready to trust the promises of God and the character of God which backs them up.

Spiritual growth is primarily and fundamentally the growth of our faith, the building up of a relationship of trust between ourselves and God. In personal relationships, we learn about the trustworthiness of other individuals by experience. We learn about their character by hearing what they say and watching what they do. In the Christian life, we are dealing with someone whose perfect character is infinitely worthy of our trust. To appreciate this fact in practice, however, requires that we "get to know God" the only way we really can: through diligent and daily study of His holy Word and the application to our everyday experience of the truths contained in the Bible (Jn.17:17). It is from the Bible that we come to know Him better day by day, that we read of His faithfulness to believers in the past and His promises to us here and now. From every chapter, from every verse, the graciousness of God speaks to us.

Learning to trust God isn't always easy – especially when we face a predicament that seems hopeless. But we should remember the example of Abraham, a believer who had his spiritual ups and downs (cf. Gen.12:9-20), but who nevertheless persevered in spiritual growth, making use of the opportunities given him to get to know God better. Eventually his faith grew to such a

tremendous degree that when God told him to sacrifice his only son, he had the faith, the intimate and personal knowledge of God's character, to know through that faith that he could calmly trust God even when called upon to do something so terribly difficult to understand, let alone to actually go through with (Heb.11:17-19). Faith means trusting in God, but that trust is built upon the firm conviction (grounded in the teaching of the Bible and carefully nurtured by many personal experiences) that such trust is well placed, that we can confidently rely on Him, and that trusting God is always the best possible course of action, even when the complicated circumstances of life might seem to indicate otherwise.

(3) Faith requires focus:

... let us run with endurance the race set before us, turning our gaze unto Jesus, the originator and completer of our faith.
Hebrews 12:1b-2

At salvation, we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ for the promise of eternal life. Now that we are Christians, we must continue everyday to exercise this same faith – in fact our spiritual growth depends on it. As we forge ahead in the Christian life, however, our objective is not simply to maintain our faith in Christ, but to strengthen it as we learn to follow Him in the manner of true disciples. Every time we trust Him, every time we believe His words, our faith grows stronger. That is why the dark and desperate times of our life have the potential for being some of the most spiritually rewarding. Difficult circumstances at least have the advantage of helping us to concentrate on God and His ever-present help.

If we trust Him when we need Him the most, and experience first-hand His mercy and help, it stands to reason that we should be able to retain some intensity of focus when the trial passes. In practice, however, the opposite is often the case. It seems to be human nature that in prosperous circumstances we tend to drop our guard and slack off of that tenacity of faith that saw us through the tough times (Heb.10:32-39). Yet focusing in on Jesus by faith is at all times an important key to spiritual growth, because such an awareness helps us to put the allures and threats of the world into their proper perspective (Heb.11:26-27).

In order to "run with endurance the race set before us", we need daily to "turn our gaze unto Jesus, the originator and completer of our faith (Heb.12:1b-2)." The word for "turn" here in the Greek is *aphorao*, a verb which means to direct one's attention away from all others to one specific object. That our faith may grow and accomplish this critical task of focusing upon the Person of our Lord, God tends it, nourishing it and pruning it to maximize its growth and production (Jn.15:2). Faith needs both of these elements to grow. The "nourishment" of the Word of God gives our faith an ever clearer understanding of the character of the Person who has promised us so much, and the "pruning" of life's ever present testing serves to transform the knowledge we learn from the Word of God into resilient wisdom. Our faith thus puts on "muscle" (so to speak) which can then be applied in times of trial.

All our growth, all our success in the Christian life, depends upon keeping our sights set on God's Son, Jesus Christ, and upon the message He embodies. As Hebrews 1:2 tells us, God has "in these last days, spoken to us through His Son." Through His incarnation and work on the cross, by the hand of his prophets and apostles, Christ has given us, His Church, the means by which we can "see Him though invisible" (Heb.11:27) and "love Him though we see Him not" (1Pet.1:8). He has given us His Holy Word.

(4) Only knowledge received in faith can be applied in faith:

For whoever wishes to draw nearer to God must believe that He exists, and that He will reward those who earnestly seek Him.

Hebrews 11:6

Spiritual growth can only be accomplished if we have proper "spiritual nutrition", and it is with this principle in mind that Peter tells us to "earnestly desire the milk of the Word (which contains no guile) so that we may grow by it toward salvation" (1Pet.2:2). But mere exposure to the Word is not enough. In order for the truth we have received through the Bible and Bible teaching to be of any use to us, we must also *believe* it. Otherwise, we resemble the man in James' epistle who looked into a mirror, went away, and promptly forgot what he looked like (Jas.1:22-25). A similar thing happened to the Corinthian believers who had heard the apostle Paul personally teach them many times about the doctrine of the resurrection of the dead, but had apparently doubted what they had been taught. As a result, they were ill-prepared for certain testing and false teaching that came their way (e.g. they would certainly have found themselves vulnerable on the death of a loved one) and earned a sharp rebuke from Paul (1Cor.15:12-19).

In the same way, when we hear a principle of truth, but hold reservations about it and so do not believe it, such knowledge will not be of any use to us in a crisis even if perchance we remember it. What we don't believe cannot possibly comfort us. Our faith must have something tangible to lean on when testing comes. It must be anchored to principles of truth solidly set in our heart. Our faith must be directed toward Christ, but must also be grounded in the truth He has bequeathed to us as the "fuel" necessary to make our way safely through this life. Not believing the principles of truth the Bible contains is just as hazardous as failing to seek them out in the first place, and with such a *modus operandi*, we shall soon find ourselves "running on empty" with our spiritual momentum grinding to a halt.

(5) True faith is not eclectic:

And because of this we also give thanks to God continually, because, when you received the word of hearing from us, you received it not as the word of men, but as it really is, the Word of God – the very Word which is at work inside of you as you believe it.

1st Thessalonians 2:13

Closely akin to the syndrome of disbelief is that of "selective" belief. The subtle difference between these two spiritual maladies is that outright disbelief is at least a clear act of rebellion

where the believer chooses to reject God's truth for any number of erroneous personal reasons. Selective disbelief, however, is self-deceptive rather than rebellious. Paul's commendation of the Thessalonians for their faithful acceptance of his teaching is in stark contrast to his condemnation of the Corinthians for the ease with which they could reject the correct teachings they had received for the latest false fad (2Cor.11:4). As believers, with all the uncertainties of the modern world to contend with, and with the multifarious facets of contemporary Christianity to choose from, there is a danger that we may take it upon ourselves to modulate the uncertainty of all the Biblical "information" humming about us. But if we set ourselves up as the ultimate umpires of the teaching we receive, we risk amplifying our doubts to the point where we are certain of nothing. Common sense should point out to us the peril involved in appointing ourselves the sole and final authorities for determining the truth of any particular teaching.

It is, after all, for the purpose of *establishing* our faith that God has distributed among us the spiritual gifts which minister the Word (Eph.4:11-16). Certainly, with so many cults and false teachers about, we need to exercise extreme caution as to whom and what to believe before we join fellowship with any group or commit ourselves to any particular ministry. Scripture explicitly advises us to do so (1Jn.4:1). But as long as a particular church or ministry holds our confidence overall, from the standpoint of our spiritual growth, it is far better for us to partake in faith, once we have become convinced of that church or ministry's essential veracity.

Besides compromising our faith, selectivity of belief has the added disadvantage of undermining the "spiritual house" of biblical knowledge we are trying to construct (Eph.2:19-22). The Bible contains myriad doctrines, principles, teachings – all of which are, in their own unique way, important to learn. The utility of any one "brick" in the structure of the spiritual house we are trying to build within us may not be immediately clear. We cannot hope to know "what good" any particular piece of the foundation may be when we lay it, but we should appreciate the fact that only a firm, *complete* foundation will stand the test of life's storms.

With faith as small as a mustard seed we are born into the family of God, and it is God's plan for us that this faith grow and grow until it is large enough to provide shelter for all the birds of the heavens (Matt.13:31-32). Such spiritual growth requires our faith to reach out and embrace *all* the principles of truth in the Bible until they form a dense fabric of spiritual character, like muscles and bones knitting into place. Whatever we learn about God and His plan, even things which may seem mundane and pointless at the time, all these elements contribute to a master framework or superstructure upon which all our future growth and spiritual success depends. The truths of the Bible unite with our faith to produce an ever stronger "spiritual backbone" that may withstand the tests that come into every Christian life.

Furthermore, this process is cyclical and self-reinforcing. Every principle mastered and believed is another piece of the puzzle completed, another brick firmly set in place solidifying the foundation of faith. Humble acceptance of Bible teaching is the only sure way to build our "spiritual house" upon the ROCK where it may endure the floods and winds of life (Matt.7:24-29).

(6) The Holy Spirit is our partner in the building up of our faith:

But we have not received the spirit of the world, but the Spirit which is from God, in order that we might know the things given to us by God.

1st Corinthians 2:12

Learning the principles of truth necessary for spiritual growth does not depend on our intellect. God has given all believers His Holy Spirit to help in the critical task of laying down a foundation of truth in our souls so that we might come to know and appreciate what tremendous things God has done for us (1Cor.2:12). Without God's help in the matter (ministered by the Holy Spirit within us), it would be impossible for us to learn His truth at all, no matter how high our I.Q.'s, for it would be "foolishness to us" (1Cor.1:18). It is not that Biblical information including principles of truth are not capable of being "learned" in an academic sense, but without faith, and without the teaching ministry of the Holy Spirit, such learning is meaningless for it does not edify or produce spiritual growth. Without the Spirit acting together with our faith, the content of any Bible teaching reaches only our mind, not our heart, and we become like those listening to someone "speaking in tongues": what he says may be good and true, but it is devoid of sense to us and does us no practical good (1Cor.14:4).

Without the Holy Spirit, one "cannot *accept* the things of the Spirit of God. For they are foolishness to him and he is not able to understand them because they are *spiritually* assessed" (1Cor.2:15). The Greek word used by Paul here and translated "assessed" is *anakrino*, meaning "to examine carefully". A person can be well versed in the scriptures, but without the illuminating ministry of the Holy Spirit, we are incapable of gaining a true understanding of the full meaning and import of scripture.

We believers, on the other hand, have the "mind of Christ", that is, the Holy Spirit, who helps us to understand God's truth as contained in the scriptures (1Cor.2:16). We are therefore not dependent upon the limitations of human intellect or human teachers in our desire to know the complete will of God (Rom.12:2). There is no place for arrogance or frustration in our quest to build up our faith by learning God's Word, for we are neither self-taught nor completely dependent on some other fallible human being, but have as our teacher God's Holy Spirit (Jn.14:17, 17:26; 1Thes.4:9; 1Jn.2:27).

(7) True faith must produce results:

For as the body without the spirit is dead, so also faith without works is dead.

James 2:26

The passage above from the book of James is a widely misunderstood one. It is often interpreted to mean that we must "work our way into heaven". Nothing, however, could be farther from the truth. The principle of salvation by grace through faith alone is clearly stated in Ephesians

2:8-10. Moreover, Paul explicitly affirms in that context that "[salvation] is not of works, lest anyone should boast" (v.9). The "works" referred to by James (without which faith is dead) are the same as the "good works" mentioned by Paul in Ephesians 2:10 "which God has prepared for us to walk in."

We should not therefore think of good works as something planned and executed by us, but see them for what they truly are: opportunities prepared by God for us for the application and demonstration of our faith.

Nor do we have to "go it alone" in the task of applying our faith to the world around us. To assist in the edification of the Church of Christ, God has given to all Christians some type of spiritual gift which is distributed and empowered by the Holy Spirit (1Cor.12:1-11). We do not choose the precise direction of our proper ministry for God in this life. That is done by God. It is, rather, our responsibility to grow spiritually to the point where our particular gifts become clear and where we have the spiritual maturity to use what we have been given effectively. The principle of spiritual gifts given by God as the basis for Christian ministry not only removes all grounds for boasting about the good works we may do, but also assures us that it is God who controls the nature, power, and specific direction of our true service to Him in this life (1Cor.12:4&11).

The "good work" done by Abraham which proves that his faith was not dead was not an act of charity, but an act of tremendous faith and obedience to God (Jas.2:21). Abraham glorified God by his work of faith, and such glorification is the central point behind spiritual gifts, Christian service, and whatever good works we as individual Christians are called upon to accomplish for the validation of our faith (Is.43:7; 1Pet.4:10-11). It is through our active, living faith in God that our light shines out in a world of darkness, glorifying God, drawing men to His love, and proving for all to see that when we say we believe in Jesus Christ and His Word, we really do mean it (Matt.5:15-16).