

## Twelve Keys to Spiritual Maturity

### Desiring Spiritual Maturity (#1)

By [Derek Thomas](#)

#### 2 Peter 3:18

Last words are always important. Some of my favorite ones are by William Wallace (of *Braveheart* fame, the thirteenth century Scottish Patriot), whose final words, or, in this case, word was "Freedom!" I am also very fond of citing the final words of 'Stonewall' Jackson, who had been inadvertently shot by his own men, "Let us pass over the river and rest under the shade of the trees."

These words are Peter's last words: "But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To Him be glory both now and forever! Amen." Peter was executed— during the reign of Nero in 68 A.D, – crucified upside down according to tradition. It must have happened shortly after writing these words! Peter's dying wish was to see Christians *growing!*

It is, in fact, a constant emphasis of Peter's: "Crave spiritual milk so that you might grow into the fullness of your salvation," he wrote in his first epistle (1 Pet 2:2; note the way that in 2 Peter 3:1 he assumes they have already read, and would be familiar with, his first epistle). It is not difficult to understand why this might be his concern. Peter had let the Savior down. He knew what the consequences of immaturity were. He was eager that others be spared the pain it brought him.

This summer, we are going to spend about three months, in a series of 12 sermons, examining the "keys" to spiritual maturity. That might sound a little mechanical, in the sense that maturity is something that can be obtained by the mere application of a formula. We are currently watching the phenomenal popularity of the book *The Prayer of Jabez*. Not a little of the attraction of this book, good as it is in many ways, is the suspicion that repeating a simple prayer, mantra-like, will radically transform our lives. There are many Christians who have prayed a particular prayer for years (for the conversion of a loved one, for example) for whom this 'formula' has not brought about the desired result. Christian maturity isn't formulaic. It is often complex because our own personalities are complex. Of no one is that more true than Peter himself. When we think of him, we recall the words of J. M. Barrie's *Peter Pan*, "I just want to be a little boy and have fun." The little boy in Peter made the application of a few simple directives inadequate for the achieving Christian maturity.

That said, we are going to try and outline some of the main parameters of Christian maturity. These "keys" taken together, rather than individually, should aid us in the longing of our hearts to grow and be more like Jesus.

Growing in grace, becoming more like Jesus, is a concern that is reflected in many parts of the New Testament.

"May the Lord make your love grow and overflow." (1Thess 3:12).

"Faith is flourishing and you are all growing in love for each other" (2Thess 1:3)

"I pray that your love may abound more and more." (Phil 1:9).

"Train yourself to be godly" (1Tim 4:7).

"Let us...become mature" (Heb 6:1).

In some of these passages, Christian maturity is presented as a fact; in others, as a goal to be achieved. There is a sense in which we have already achieved something terribly significant in terms of maturity in our union with Jesus Christ. We are not what we once were! This reflects part of the tension between the what we are "now" and what we have yet to "become." Here in 2 Peter, it is an imperative. It assumes we have not yet attained the fullness of what we *ought*, and what one day we *shall* be. As A. W. Pink puts it: "It brings no glory to God that his children should be dwarfs."

Christian maturity is important because growth is evidence of life. A picture doesn't grow. The stake that holds a young sapling doesn't grow. But we are meant to grow! Lack of it is a serious condition that robs Christians of the joys and privileges of the Christian life and in its ultimate sense warns of possible hypocrisy, false profession and apostasy.

## **1. The Measurement of Spiritual Growth**

Peter mentions two things which serve as a measurement of how we are to grow in grace. We are to grow in *grace* and in *knowledge*.

### ***i. Grace.***

Peter was enamored by the thought of grace. He begins both his epistles by mentioning it (1Pet 1:2; 2Pet 1:2). In fact, he not only mentions grace in these opening remarks but says something very similar about getting to know this grace more and more. It's the key word of the New Testament, isn't it? Undeserved favor! God showing us favor when we deserve disfavor or judgment.

"By grace are ye saved, through faith and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God; not of works, lest any man should boast (Eph 2:10). Peter read his Bible (the Old Testament as we now call it) and discovered that grace was the chief concern of prophets as they prophesied about God's *gracious* salvation (1Pet 1:10).

We need to start here: with the grace that brings salvation to our sin-ruined souls. It is grace which has brought *life*, new life, regeneration! You remember how Peter puts it? We are "born again, not of corruptible things such as silver and gold....but by the precious blood of Christ" (1 Pet 1:18). You might call that *the grace of justification*. But there's another kind of grace, a *continuing grace*. The grace of sanctification. The grace that perseveres with us day by day, through our many failures and setbacks.

Peter is thinking about this persevering kind of grace. The grace that has saved him, rescued him from the pit of sin, called him to be a disciple, lifted him again and again whenever he fell. I can't help but think that it's this latter aspect of God's grace that he has in mind. He's been talking about the Second Coming: that His return isn't slow as people reckon it, that a thousand years is as one day, that all the great redemptive events have taken place already and the next one is the Second Coming. And the reason why He "delays" is, well, GRACE! He wants (*desires*) to be gracious to sinners. He gives them opportunity for repentance. Isn't that grace?

Peter is thinking about God's grace in these *last days*, and he says, "Since everything will be destroyed in this way, what kind of people ought you to be?" (2 Pet 3:11). Since you have experienced grace, and grace is going to bring you home, then you should live your lives accordingly. As you are looking forward to a new heavens and new earth, live pure and blameless and be at peace with God.

And what he means, I think, is spelled out for us in verse 17 where he urges his readers not to lose their secure footing (cf. 1:12) in the face of wicked people who are suggesting all kinds of things in relation to the Second Coming.

Just as God's grace has saved you and held you and strengthened you in the past, grow in that awareness. As you see people all around you slip and fall, I want you to grow.

Think of how some important Christian books urge us to do the same: Michael Horton's *Putting the Amazing back into Grace!*, or John Bunyan's *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*. Or the wonderful hymn of John Newton: *Amazing Grace*

Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound  
that saved a wretch like me!

I once was lost, but now am found,  
was blind, but now can see.

T'was grace which taught my heart to fear,  
and Grace my fears relieved!  
How precious did that Grace appear,  
when first I did believe.

Through many troubles, toils, and snares,  
I have already come!  
T'was Grace that brought me safe thus far,  
and Grace will see me home.

As an example of growing in grace, we can think of Paul. I think you can see Paul growing in his appreciation of grace whenever he talks about his own sense of unworthiness. He wrote to the Corinthians in the years 57/58, and he calls himself "least of all the apostles" (1 Cor 15:9). By the years 61/62, he is writing to the Ephesians and calling himself "less than the least of all God's people" (Eph. 3:8). At the end of his life, in the years 65/66, he writes to Timothy and calls himself "worst of sinners" (1 Tim 1:16).

Peter's concern for Christians to grow is without qualification. No matter what our circumstances may be, it is imperative that we grow. And do you know why Peter can look at everything that's happening: the good, the bad and the ugly, and say: you can grow through all of this? Do you? Because he had a firm grip on the doctrine of election! He writes to them, and what does he call them? "God's chosen people" (1Pet 1:1). I think that Peter wants us to see that history is the outworking of His sovereign plan and purpose. That running through the course of our lives is GRACE! Every step of the way. Grace that chooses, saves, delivers, glorifies. And it is a grace that impels us to grow.

## ***ii. Knowledge***

We are not only to grow in grace; we are also to grow in knowledge! Commentators are divided as to whether this knowledge is to be considered objectively or subjectively. Are we to grow in the knowledge Christ gives us, or are we to grow in our knowledge of Him? Are we to grow in what we know about Him or are we to grow in our fellowship with Him? It may be that we are not to make a choice between these two since both are equally important. The one feeds upon the other. You cannot divide *head knowledge* and *heart knowledge* in such a way that one is deemed more important than the other. The two go together. The one truly leads to the other. You cannot grow in love with someone until you come to know that person: what they are like, their tastes, dislikes, interests, peculiarities.

What Peter is urging is that we get to know Christ more. We should be

contemplating His person and work. We should think of Him in his three states: pre-existent, incarnate and glorified at God's right hand. We should think of Him in terms of what Calvin called the *munus triplex*: the three-fold nature of Christ's offices as prophet to teach us, priest to forgive us and king to rule over us. "*Jesus the very thought of thee, with sweetness fills my breast*" we sing.

It's the very heart of covenant life to think of Jesus this way. And at the end of the day, that's what Sanctification is! Christ-likeness. Growing so as resemble Christ.

Do you notice that Peter puts grace first? *Before* Knowledge. He isn't interested in producing mere Pharisees. Jonathan Edwards, in a series of 70 resolutions governing his own spiritual discipline, began his list this way:

"Being sensible that I am unable to do any thing without God's help, I do humbly entreat Him, by His grace, to enable me to keep these Resolutions, so far as they are agreeable to His will, for Christ's sake."

Transforming Grace!

Apart from grace, all this becomes legalism!

## **2. Observations about Spiritual Growth**

### ***i. Spiritual growth is best measured when under pressure.***

What I mean is this: it is difficult to measure spiritual growth. Unlike height or weight, spiritual growth is best measured in response to various trials and difficulties. Peter is writing to warn of the possibility of apostasy and backsliding (v.17). "As others are going backwards, I want you to be going forwards," he seems to be saying. Keep on keeping on.

Be careful if you decide to start praying for maturity! God may answer this prayer by passing you through the fires of testing! It may be that your longing for growth will be answered with a thorn in your side to keep you focused!

### ***ii. Growth in spiritual maturity isn't necessarily uniform.***

We see that in Peter's life, don't we? What accounts for the change from the courtyard where Peter is cowering at the suggestion of the young girl that he, too, is one of the disciples, and the fiery, unflinching preacher in the days that followed Pentecost. In those six weeks something quite astonishing has occurred. I think if we could watch and compare Peter in these two situations we would be amazed just how he had grown in those weeks. Sometimes, growth comes that suddenly!

Some of this has to do with Peter's (and therefore our) personality. Peter was headstrong and talkative! He's the one who always speaks! He was impulsive, rushing in where angels fear to tread. He suffered from "foot-in-the-mouth" syndrome! And this rendered his progress erratic.

### ***iii. Spiritual maturity isn't automatic!***

We often approach issues of sanctification with passivity! We who believe in the sovereignty of God do this all too often. We tend to think that sanctification is something to be achieved "by faith alone" without any "doing" on our part. But that is to misunderstand the nature of sanctification. There is an aspect of sanctification that renders us holy, to which we contribute nothing. Paul can write to the Corinthians and call them "holy" and "sanctified" (1 Cor 1:1-2). We are set apart and drawn into union with Christ. Nothing will ever be the same again as a result of that act. But there is also an aspect of sanctification that requires effort on our part. It will not look after itself. Sanctification doesn't come by osmosis. We are to fight! "Be diligent...", Peter says (2 Pet 3:14). "Be on your guard," he continues (2 Pet 3:17). We are to make every effort to ensure that it is a priority. I want to speak to our church staff here. Just because you are involved in "ministry" doesn't mean that you are growing in grace.

You may be tempted to think that because you have been around a long time, this gives you automatic entitlement to maturity. But not necessarily! You can have a tree that you think looks mature in your garden but when the winds come you discover that its roots are not very deep at all and it blows down! It will be in fires of testing that our maturity, or lack of it, will be revealed.

### ***iv. Spiritual maturity isn't an entirely personal issue.***

Discipleship in the New Testament is a corporate thing. The imperative verb used here "grow" is in the plural. That reflects something of a prevailing concern in the New Testament. We grow as we relate to each other, rather than in isolation. Spiritual disciplines that lead to growth take place corporately. That is why we are to hold each other accountable.

"Are you growing?" is a good way to start a conversation with a fellow believer. No one, who is at all concerned about spiritual things will consider that question an imposition. It can be the lead-in to a fruitful time of moral and spiritual reckoning.

Are *you* growing?

This summer, why not pray that God would use these sermons to speak to your heart. Wonderful things could happen in the space of the next three months!

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