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## GUARDING, GROWING, GLORIFYING

2 Peter 3:17-18

By

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2 Peter, Lesson 15

## Guarding, Growing, Glorifying 2 Peter 3:17-18

Every Christian should aim at finishing well. Steadfastness and perseverance are huge themes in the New Testament. One lesson from Jesus' parable of the sower is that it's easy to begin well. The seed on the rocky ground sprang up quickly. The seed on the thorny ground seemed to be doing well for a while. But neither of them persevered to bring forth fruit. Only the seed on the good soil bore fruit with perseverance (Luke 8:15). In the context of persecution, false prophets, and lawlessness, Jesus said, (Matt. 24:13), "But the one who endures to the end, he will be saved."

Probably no other Christian in history can match the accomplishments of the apostle Paul. Yet when he neared the end of his life, he did not mention his many accomplishments, but rather his perseverance. He said (2 Tim. 4:7), "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith." In his letters, he often emphasizes the need for steadfastness, especially when we encounter trials (1 Cor. 15:58; Gal. 6:9; Col. 1:11, 23). The author of Hebrews also repeatedly emphasizes the need to "run with endurance the race that is set before us" (Heb. 12:1; see, also 2:1; 3:6, 12, 14; 4:14; 10:36). The Book of Revelation promises the victor's crown to the overcomers, who persevere (Rev. 2:10-11, 17, 19, 25; 3:5, 10-12, 21).

As Peter finishes his final epistle, concerned about the false teachers that were plaguing the churches, he wants his readers to persevere. And so he repeats the themes that he has emphasized throughout the letter, warning of the danger of the false teachers and exhorting us to grow in the grace and knowledge of Jesus Christ. He gives us three essentials for perseverance in the faith:

To persevere as a Christian, guard yourself from spiritual error, grow in the grace and knowledge of Jesus Christ, and live to glorify Him.

Guarding, growing, and glorifying! There is a progression between the three terms. If you guard yourself from spiritual error,

you will not fall from your own steadfastness and thus will grow in your relationship with Christ. And if you grow in Christ, you will glorify Him with your life, which is your chief purpose.

1. To persevere as a Christian, guard yourself from spiritual error (3:17).

The New Testament is clear that the enemy deceitfully infiltrates the church with false teachers who sound biblical, but deceptively lead God's people away from the truth into destructive heresies. Peter has spent chapter 2 and a good part of chapter 3 warning about these men. In 3:16, he refers to them as "the untaught and unstable" (in contrast to the steadfast), who distorted the Scriptures to their own destruction. So in 3:17 Peter warns, "You therefore, beloved, knowing this beforehand, be on your guard so that you are not carried away by the error of unprincipled men and fall from your own steadfastness."

"Steadfastness" is a Greek noun used only here in the New Testament. But Jesus used the verb when He predicted Peter's denials and then said (Luke 22:32), "when once you have turned again, *strengthen* your brothers." Simon Peter, who had been so unstable, was changed by God's grace into a rock of steadfastness, so that now he is concerned that others be steadfast in the Lord.

"You" is emphatic, standing in contrast to the false teachers. By telling his readers that they know this (how the false teachers operate) beforehand, Peter is using the principle of reminder and repetition that he has followed earlier in the letter (1:12-15; 3:1-2). He is saying that to be forewarned is to be forearmed. We get our word "prognosis" from the Greek word translated "beforehand." A prognosis enables you to get ready so that some predicted danger will not catch you unaware. If a doctor says, "If you do not lose some weight, you run a high risk of contracting diabetes," he's telling you in advance so that you can take corrective action to prevent the disease.

Peter's prognosis is that in the church there will be these untaught, unstable, and unprincipled (or, "lawless") men who distort Scripture to support their immoral lifestyles. In other words, they used the Bible, but they either cited things out of context or used only the verses that seemed to support their perverted point of

view, ignoring the verses that confronted their sin. And, since fallen sinners instinctively want to avoid the light so that their evil deeds will not be exposed (John 3:19-20), these false teachers never lack an audience (2 Tim. 4:3). Some of the largest churches in America are led by men mixing truth and error in subtle, destructive ways. One rule to test them by is, if a man never confronts sin, he is not preaching the Word of God (2 Tim. 4:1-2).

Let's face it: the Bible has some hard teachings that confront the popular ideas of every culture. It's not popular to say that we all are born in sin, hopelessly lost, unable and unwilling to come to God for salvation. It's much more flattering to human pride to say that while we all mess up once in a while, we're really not so bad as to deserve hell. Hell itself is not a popular topic. It's not popular to teach that Jesus is the only way to heaven and that those from other religions, no matter how sincere, will not go to heaven unless they repent and trust in Christ alone.

It's not popular to teach that we must repent of our sins and submit to Christ as absolute Lord and Master. It's much more palatable to teach that grace means that God winks at our sin and that Jesus is there to help us reach our full potential. I've been accused of being legalistic and not understanding grace because I teach that we must obey Jesus Christ.

It's not popular and soon may be criminal to teach that homosexual behavior is sinful. It's not popular to teach that it is sin to engage in any sexual activity outside of marriage. We've seen numerous couples stop attending this church because we insist that they stop living together before they get married. They usually just find another church that isn't "hung up" over such matters. It's not popular to teach that men and women have complementary, but distinct, roles in the home and in the church. And the list could go on and on!

Some would say that it's not loving to be so critical and judgmental about these matters. They say that we ought to be positive, not negative. But notice that Peter again (3:1, 8, 14, 17) addresses his readers as "beloved." He cared deeply for these believers and therefore he warned them about these destructive teachers. If you love your children, you warn them sternly about running out into the street. As they get older, love moves you to warn them about

the dangers of drinking, drugs, and sexual immorality. You know that these sins can leave them with permanent scars. Love is not just positive; it has a negative side of warning about the destructive nature of sin and of false teaching.

One other thought here: There is a link between knowledge and behavior. Peter says, “knowing this beforehand, be on your guard.” Paul says that the job of elders is “both to exhort in sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict” (Titus 1:9). In this vein, Michael Green notes (*The Second Epistle of Peter and the Epistle of Jude* [Eerdmans], p. 149), “Plain speaking about Christian deviations is incumbent upon the Christian pastor who wants to lead his flock along the way of truth.”

Practically, to guard yourself from spiritual error, I encourage you to read some books on basic Christian doctrine. The *1689 London Baptist Confession of Faith* (a modern version is, *A Faith to Confess* [Carey Publications]), based on the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, is a good place to start. John Piper has written a short catechism based on this confession (on [desiringgod.org](http://desiringgod.org)). Josh Harris has just written, *Dug Down Deep* [Multnomah], subtitled, “Unearthing What I Believe and Why it Matters.” R. C. Sproul’s *Essential Truths of the Christian Faith* [Tyndale] or J. I. Packer’s *Concise Theology: A Guide to Historic Christian Beliefs* [Tyndale] are written on an easy-to-understand level. For something more meaty and comprehensive, tackle Wayne Grudem’s *Systematic Theology* [Zondervan] or Calvin’s *Institutes* [Westminster Press]. To persevere as a Christian, you must guard yourself from the many spiritual errors of our day.

2. To persevere as a Christian, grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ (3:18a).

Being on guard will keep you from being tossed around by every wind of doctrine (Eph. 4:14) and will enable you to grow. We need to consider several truths about growth in general before we look at what it means to grow in the grace and knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ.

- Growth depends on life.

This is just as true spiritually as it is physically. You must be born before you can grow. The Bible teaches that we all enter the world spiritually dead (Eph. 2:1-3). Being religious or moral is not

enough. Jesus told the religious, moral Pharisee, Nicodemus (John 3:3), "Unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God." God alone can impart new life. Without new life from God, Christianity becomes moralism. Genuine Christianity is a matter of what Henry Scougal called, "the life of God in the soul of man."

- Growth is a necessity, not an option.

The Christian life is like riding a bike: if you aren't moving forward, you'll fall off. To maintain your steadfastness, you must be growing. If a child is not growing, he has a serious health problem. Growth is normal when there is life. But, unlike children, when it comes to the spiritual life, growth doesn't end. We must keep growing until the day when we meet Jesus Christ. After more than 25 years as a Christian, the apostle Paul wrote (Phil. 3:13-14), "Brethren, I do not regard myself as having laid hold of it yet; but one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus." We never reach the place where we can say, "I've arrived!"

- Growth is gradual, not instantaneous.

Even Jesus started out in this world as a baby. No one moves from being a baby to an adult in a day, a week, or even a few years. It takes time to mature and develop. You don't bring a baby home from the hospital and say, "There's the refrigerator, kid. The bathroom is down the hall. Take care of yourself!" You don't expect a baby to do what a 20-year-old can do, nor do you expect a 20-year-old to have the maturity of a 60-year-old. Growth is a process.

The important thing is to be involved in the process so that there is progress. You may not discern change from week to week, but over the long haul, you should be able to look back and see that you love Christ more now than you did five years ago. Now you are more sensitive to your sin than you were before. Now you obey the Word more consistently than you used to do.

The fact that growth is gradual runs counter to the popular idea that you can become holy in an instant through some powerful experience with God. The thought of instant, effortless sanctification sounds appealing. It's often promoted as, "get baptized in the Spirit," or, "speak in tongues," and you will have instant victory

over sin. That appeals to me for the same reason that winning the Reader's Digest Sweepstakes appeals to me: I would be instantly rich without having to work hard and be disciplined to live within my means and save money. Sign me up! But God's way to godliness is through discipline, not through miracles (1 Tim. 4:7). I'm not saying that God never gives us dramatic spiritual experiences. Such times are wonderful when they come. I am saying that such experiences do not make you instantly mature! Growth is gradual, not instantaneous.

- Growth is difficult, not easy.

You've got to crawl before you walk and once you get the hang of walking, you still fall down a lot. And spiritual growth is the same way. There are a lot of tough lessons that you only learn by trial and error. Sometimes you fall flat on your face. You have to get up and keep trying again. Sometimes you get over-confident, thinking, "I've finally learned that lesson!" Then you fail and the Lord shows you that you haven't learned it yet.

With those general lessons, let's consider specifically what it means to grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

#### A. Grow in the grace of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Grace is the key to a relationship with God because He both saves us by His grace (Eph. 2:8) and sustains us by grace (2 Cor. 12:9). But grace is opposed to every human way of approaching God, and so we have to be on guard constantly so that we do not lapse into a merit system with God. The world operates on the merit system. If you work for good grades in school, you can get into college. You work hard in college and you get rewarded with a good job. You work hard on the job and you are rewarded with pay increases and promotions. In the merit system, you get what you deserve and you deserve what you get. And all of the world's religions, including some that are labeled "Christian," operate on the merit system. You get into heaven based on what you have done. The merit system rewards our achievement and feeds our pride.

But grace is opposed to the merit system. Grace means undeserved favor. We deserve God's wrath, but He blesses us apart from our works. Under grace, we do not work to earn heaven, but

we freely receive all that God has provided for us at Christ's expense. Paul explains (Rom. 4:4-5), "Now to the one who works, his wage is not credited as a favor, but as what is due. But to the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is credited as righteousness." Under grace, God gets all the credit and human pride is humbled.

How do we grow in the grace which comes from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ? The overall principle is, "God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble" (1 Pet. 5:5). Growing in grace involves coming to a greater understanding of God's holiness, justice, and sovereignty, which also makes you see more of your own rebellion, selfishness, and pride. You see more and more of how unworthy you were to be the object of God's saving grace, and yet you also see more and more of how great His undeserved love and favor were that drew you to Himself.

C. H. Spurgeon explained it this way (*Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit* [Pilgrim Publications], 46:539-540):

If you, dear friend, would be truly humble, you must look at your Savior, for then you will say,

Alas! And did my Savior bleed?  
And did my Sovereign die?  
Would He devote that sacred head  
For such a worm as I?

You will never feel yourself such a worm as when, by faith, you see your Savior dying for you; you will never know your own nothingness so well as when you see your Savior's greatness. When you grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, you will be sure to grow in humility.

Martyn Lloyd-Jones affirms the same thing (*Expository Sermons on 2 Peter* [Banner of Truth], p. 251), "Personally I can be certain I am growing in grace if I have an increasing sense of my own sinfulness and my own unworthiness; if I see more and more the blackness of my own heart." To grow in grace, you must esteem yourself *less*, but esteem Christ more!

B. Grow in the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

For the third time in this letter, Peter refers to Jesus as “our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (1:11; 2:20). You cannot separate Jesus Christ as Savior from Jesus Christ as Lord. When you trust in Christ as Savior, you yield all of yourself that you know to all of Christ that you know. The Christian life is a matter of progressively growing in submission to Christ as through God’s Word you see more of who He is and more of who you are.

The knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ comes from Christ as we grow in obedience to Him. Jesus said (John 14:21), “He who has My commandments and keeps them is the one who love Me; and he who loves Me will be loved by My Father, and I will love him and will disclose Myself to him.” Such knowledge of Christ includes both facts about Him (as revealed in Scripture) and knowing Him personally. You need both.

Michael Green explains (p. 151), “Knowledge *of* Christ and knowledge *about* Christ are, if they keep pace with one another, both the safeguard against heresy and apostasy and also the means of growth in grace.” Knowledge about Christ keeps you from the many errors of the false cults that deny the deity of Jesus Christ. But Christ is not just a subject to be studied; He also is a person to be known. We should be growing to know Him personally on a deeper and deeper level as we spend frequent time with Him in His Word and in prayer.

So Peter tells us that to persevere as a Christian, we must guard ourselves from spiritual error and grow in the grace and knowledge of Him. Finally,

3. To persevere as a Christian, live to glorify Jesus Christ (3:18b).

Peter ends with a doxology (3:18b): “To Him be the glory, both now and to the day of eternity. Amen.” This is as clear of a statement of Christ’s deity as there could be. God will not share His glory with anyone (Isa. 42:8; 48:11), and yet Peter ascribes glory to Jesus Christ. Clearly, Jesus Christ is God. The overarching theme of the Christian life is to glorify the triune God in everything. This means that our aim in growing in grace is not so that we can feel happier or more fulfilled or more significant. Rather, our lives should exalt Christ, so that through us others may see how

great He truly is. "He must increase, but I must decrease" (John 3:30). He alone is worthy!

When is He to be glorified? Both now and to the day of eternity. We begin now! We should praise and exalt Him in all that we do, both on Sundays when we gather for worship and throughout the week as we think often on His great love and sacrifice that saved us from God's wrath. And then, when we are with Him in heaven when He comes, we will gather around the throne and sing, "Worthy is the Lamb who was slain to receive power and riches and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing" (Rev. 5:12)! Glorify Him both now and unto the day of eternity!

### Conclusion

At the 1968 Olympics in Mexico City, the last of the marathon runners were being carried off the field to first aid stations about an hour after the winner had crossed the finish line. Just a few spectators remained in the stands when they suddenly heard the sound of sirens and police whistles. All eyes turned to the gate to see John Stephen Akhwari, wearing the colors of Tanzania, limping into the stadium. His leg was bloodied and bandaged from a bad fall. He hobbled around the track past the finish line as the crowd rose and applauded as if he were the winner.

Someone later asked him why he had not quit, in view of his injury and the fact that he had no chance of winning a medal. He replied, "My country did not send me 7,000 miles to start the race. They sent me 7,000 miles to finish it." (From, *Leadership*, Spring, 1992, p. 49.)

Christ didn't give His life for you just to start the Christian life. He gave His life so that you would finish it and finish it well. You will do so if you guard yourself from spiritual error, grow in the grace and knowledge of Him, and live to glorify His name.

## Application Questions

1. What are some of the subtle spiritual errors of our day that we need to be on guard against?
2. How can we know if we're growing spiritually? What are some biblical tests for growth?
3. Many today confuse grace with being tolerant of sin. What biblical texts refute this? What does grace really mean?
4. What is the difference between knowing about Christ and knowing Christ? Can you have one without the other?

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