

For some weeks now we have taken a break from our exposition of the Sermon on the Mount, and have been considering the topical subject of Spiritual Growth—thus far we have seen—its need, nature, source, and then last week we began to consider its promotion—if you remember I suggested essential to the promotion of growth is the diligent use of the means of grace—which I defined as—“the exercises or activities ordained of God whereby grace is ordinarily communicated to the soul”—these I distinguished between public and private—public has reference to those activities usually performed on the Lord’s Day within the formal gathering of God’s people—if your recall I suggested three—[a] the public preaching and teaching of God’s word, [b] the activities associated with public worship [prayer, praise, and the use of the sacraments], and [c] the fellowship of the saints—thus having addressed the public means ordained of God whereby His people are matured, we come this morning to the private means of grace...

- I. An Examination of the Primary Private Means
- II. Some Clarifications concerning Private Means

- I. An Examination of the Primary Private Means

- A. The daily intake of Scripture

1. This is of course is where we must start—there is simply no lasting spiritual growth outside of the daily intake of Holy Scripture...
2. Repeatedly the Scriptures are likened to milk and meat whereby our souls are nourished and strengthened...
3. Matt.4:4—“man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God...”—in other words—just as bread is need for the body the word is needed for the soul...
4. Job 23:12—“I have not departed from the commandment of His lips; I have treasured the words of His mouth more than my necessary food...”
5. In other words—Job treasured the word of God [which was food for his soul] as more valuable than that food necessary for his physical existence...
6. 1Pet.2:1-3—“therefore, laying aside all malice, all deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and all evil speaking, as newborn babes, desire the pure milk of the word, that you may grow thereby, if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is gracious...”
7. Notice [a] the imagery—“as newborn babes...”—here Peter uses the imagery of a newly born baby’s need for milk...
8. Lenski—“The point of the figurative language is this: as a babe longs for nothing but its mother’s milk and will take nothing else, so every Christian should take no spiritual nourishment save the Word...”
9. Thus Peter isn’t rebuking his readers for being babes—but he’s teaching us that in this sense all Christians remain babes...
10. All Christians regardless how long they’ve been in the faith and regardless how much progress they’ve made—remain in desperate need for the pure milk of the word...
11. Notice [b] the exhortation—“desire the pure milk of the word...”—the word “desire” refers to—“a strong inner longing or intense desire...”
12. We find the same verb twice in the Greek OT of Ps.119, v20—“my soul breaks with longing for your judgments at all times...” v131—“I opened my mouth, and panted: for I longed for thy commandments...”
13. Thus when Peter exhorts us to—“desire the pure milk of the word”—he is exhorting us to cultivate an intense spiritual hunger or thirst...
14. To this end Peter begins by telling us—“to lay aside all malice, all deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and all evil speaking...”
15. In other words—the cultivation of spiritual hunger or thirst necessitates the emptying of the soul of all that would hinder this hunger...
16. By “pure milk” Peter is likely referring to the native purity of the word, Ps.12:6—“the words of the LORD are pure words: as silver tried in a furnace of earth, purified seven times...”
17. Or else he could be contrasting the pure teaching of the word with that of the watered down and corrupted teaching of the false teachers...

18. Within Peter's day it was a common practice to water down both milk and wine for a profit, 2Cor.2:17 —“but we are not as many, which corrupt the word of God...”—that is, corrupt it byway of deluding it...
19. But either way—one thing is very certain—we are to long for the pure, uncorrupted, unmixed, word of God...
20. Notice [c] the purpose—“that you may grow thereby...”—a consistent intake and digestion of the word of God is essential to our spiritual growth...
21. There exists within the word certain spiritual qualities, necessary to nourish, strengthen, and thus grow the soul...
22. The word of God transforms our thinking which in turn changes our feeling and doing—we are sanctified (Jn.17:17)—by the truth...
23. Thomas Schreiner—“The means by which God sanctifies believers is through the mind, through the continued proclamation of the word. Spiritual growth is not primarily mystical but rational, and rational in the sense that it is informed and sustained by God's word...”
24. Notice [d] the motive—“if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is gracious...”—having tasted of the sweetness of the milk continue to desire it...
25. Peter likely has in mind Ps.34:8—“Oh, taste and see that the LORD is good...”—he is continuing the imagery of spiritual taste...
26. John Brown—“To taste that the Lord is gracious, is to know that the Lord is gracious; and to know this, not from the report of others, but from your own experience...”
27. Thus essential to any true and lasting growth is the daily intake or assimilation of the old and New Testament Scriptures...
28. To be specific [1] Scripture must be read—we must set up and be consistent with some form of a daily reading schedule...
29. Whether it's one or two chapters a day—one chapter from the OT and another from the new—we need to consistently read through our Bibles...
30. Notice [2] Scripture must be studied—one man described study as reading Scripture with a pencil and notebook...
31. Donald Whitney—“The basic difference between Bible reading and Bible study is simply a pencil and a piece of paper. Write down observations about the text as you read and record questions that come to your mind. If your Bible has cross-references, look up the ones that relate to the verses that prompt your questions, then record your insights...”
32. My brethren—when was the last time you read your Bible with the goal to trace out a given theme, subject, or word...
33. When was the last time you placed your Bible on your kitchen table—got out a concordance, perhaps a trusted commentary and spent an hour studying Scripture...
34. Ezra 7:10—“Ezra had devoted himself to the study and observance of the Law of the LORD...”—notice “study” and “observance” go together...
35. He studied the Scripture that he might observe it—he went beyond reading and studied—he studied it for the purpose of practicing it...
36. We could liken reading to driving through a park getting a general and broad view—while studying is like stopping the car at certain sites...
37. Jerry Bridges—“Reading gives us breadth, but study gives us depth...”—that is—reading gives us the big picture whereas studying gives a clearer understanding of a given passage...
38. Both are necessary—we need to have a broad familiarity with Scripture—but we also need to get out of the car on occasions to study things up close...
39. Notice [3] Scripture must be pondered—here of course I refer to meditation—to deep thinking and pondering on a given text...
40. Ps.119:97—“Oh, how I love your law! It is my meditation all the day...v99 I have more understanding than all my teachers, for your testimonies are my meditation...”
41. If reading Scripture could be likened to driving through the park—and study of Scripture to getting out and walking through a particular sight...
42. Then meditation on Scripture could be likened to a careful inspection of a particular tree—examining and pondering every branch and leaf...

43. Now I trust you know that Scriptural mediation is very dissimilar to how many eastern religions have described it—as an attempt to empty the mind...
 44. But in Biblical or Christian meditation—we don't desire to empty the mind but fill it with Scripture—contemplating every word and syllable...
 45. My brethren—I've said this before [in fact many times]—fewer disciplines have more consistently proven a means of grace to me than meditation...
- B. The diligent use of private prayer
1. I trust it goes without saying—that prayer is vital to any true and lasting growth—that prayer [and in particular private prayer] is an essential means of grace...
 2. Now I'm sure aware that the Scriptures speak of various kinds of prayer—there are those short prayers that should be offered up throughout the day often called ejaculatory prayer...
 3. There are family prayers where we come to the throne of grace collectively as a family to confess our sins and find renewed grace and provision...
 4. Yet—I want to focus upon a particular kind of prayer for a particular purpose—namely—private prayer for the purpose of spiritual growth...
 5. To be specific, private prayer [1] empties us of any self-trust—prayer is a humbling activity that brings us to God as poor beggars...
 6. It's for this reason that throughout the Psalms prayer is described by such terms as—cries and groans—as it's an expression of utter emptiness and poverty...
 7. Pink—"Pray is not so much an act as it is an attitude—an attitude of dependency, dependency upon God. Prayer is a confession of creature weakness, yea, of helplessness. Prayer is the acknowledgment of our need and the spreading of it before God. We do not say that this is all there is in prayer, it is not: but it is the essential, the primary element in prayer..."
 8. Thus prayer [and in particular private prayer] empties the soul of all self-trust and dependence—it puts the soul in a dependent and needy frame...
 9. 2Cor.12:10—"when I am weak, then I am strong..."—that is—when I am conscious of my own weakness then I seek strength in Christ...
 10. Oh my brethren—what a blessing prayer is—to come before our Father as we actually are—weak and needy...
 11. This is a necessary means of grace as it empties of all self-ability and trust—it empties us of all self-effort and strength...
 12. Isa.40:29—"He gives power to the weak, and to those who have no might He increases strength..."—that is—strength is given to those who lack it...
 13. Notice [2] it obtains fresh supplies of mercy and forgiveness—this in turn provides a clean conscience which motivates and energizes the soul...
 14. Ps.86:5—"for you, Lord, are good, and ready to forgive, and abundant in mercy to all those who call upon you..."
 15. Notice two things—[a] an abundance of mercy—"for you, Lord, are good, and ready to forgive, and abundant in mercy..."
 16. Let me remind you that mercy presupposes guilt and misery—thus mercy and forgiveness are often found together—"ready to forgive and abundant in mercy..."
 17. Thus David needed continued or ongoing forgiveness—which we often refer to as parental forgiveness in contrast to judicial...
 18. Every justified person has already been forgiven judicially—they have been fully pardoned of all their sins not one excepted...
 19. But when these are actually committed in time they're still sin—and as sin need forgiving—but not judicial but parental forgiveness...
 20. We remain in desperate need of mercy—mercy to forgive us and to cleanse us from a guilty and defiled conscience...
 21. Notice again the text—"for you, Lord, are good, and ready to forgive, and abundant in mercy [plenteous in mercy]..."

22. There is enough mercy in God to continuously cleanse the whole of His children for all eternity if necessary...
 23. Notice [b] the means to obtain mercy—"to all those who call upon you..."—that is—those who pray to you, v6—"give ear, O LORD, to my prayer..."
 24. Thus while there is an abundance of mercy with God—it is only had by those who ask—by those who call upon His name...
 25. Brethren, I think we at times minimize the power of a clean conscience—a conscience void of offence both before God and man...
 26. Yet a freshly cleansed conscience provides strength—or perhaps I could put it this way—the application of mercy gives way to joy that provides strength...
 27. This is implied from v4—"rejoice the soul of your servant, for to you, O LORD, I lift up my soul..."—rejoice my soul by granting me mercy...
 28. Thus we read in v16—"oh, turn to me, and have mercy on me! Give your strength to your servant..."—that is—strength as a result of mercy...
 29. This is the express teaching of Neh.8:10—"the joy of the LORD is your strength..."—the more joy a man has the more strength they will find...
 30. A person who's conscience is crippled with unconfessed sin and doubt—a soul devoid of true gospel joy—is not a soul that's growing...
 31. Notice [3] it exchanges our weakness for His strength—it is through prayer that grace or strength is communicated to the soul...
 32. Ps.138:3—"in the day when I cried out, you answered me, and made me bold with strength in my soul..."—literally—you strengthened me with strength in my soul...
 33. Notice [a] there is prayer—"in the day when I cried out, you answered me..." and [b] there is strength—"and made me bold with strength in my soul..."
 34. Heb.4:16—"let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need..."
 35. Jude 1:20-21—"but you, beloved, building yourselves up on your most holy faith, praying in the Holy Spirit, keep yourselves in the love of God, looking for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ unto eternal life..."
 36. Beginning with v20 the apostle Jude provides a contrast to the false teachers he has been describing since v4—"for certain men have crept in unnoticed, etc..."
 37. V19—"these are sensual persons, who cause division, not having the Spirit..."—in contrast to this, v20—"but you, beloved, building yourselves up on your most holy faith, praying in the Holy Spirit..."
 38. Notice two things [a] what we are to do—"building yourselves up on your most holy faith..."—that is—building yourselves upon the foundation of the truth...
 39. Many of you will know that the NT uses the concept of "faith" is two ways—as "our faith" and as "the faith..."
 40. V3—"beloved...I found it necessary to write to you exhorting you to contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints..."
 41. Barns—"The phrase "most holy faith" here refers to the system of religion which was founded on faith; and the meaning is, that they should seek to establish themselves most firmly in the belief of the doctrines, and in the practice of the duties of that system of religion..."
 42. Notice [b] how we are to do it—"praying in the Holy Spirit..."—we could render the preposition—"praying in, by, or with the Holy Spirit..."
 43. It refers to the work of the Holy Spirit in enabling us to pray—working in us fresh supplies of grace and strength...
 44. Zech.12:10—"I will pour upon them a spirit of grace and supplication..."—that is—I will give the Spirit to work within them grace for supplication...
 45. Thus the primary means given to build ourselves up is prayer—true heart-felt Holy Spirit generated prayer...
- C. The deliberate use of self-examination

1. By “deliberate” I mean “purposed or intentional”—a kind of examination that takes place in a regular and consistent manner...
2. Just as our bodies need to be examined for potential physical sickness—so too our souls need daily check-ups to ensure maximum spiritual health...
3. Now it is my opinion that fewer disciplines are neglected within modern Christendom—than the practice of self-examination...
4. Few people are capable of spending 5 or 10 minutes a day in silent reflection and contemplation—in getting to know ourselves...
5. My friends—what a tragedy is it—that so few professing Christians have an accurate and intimate knowledge of themselves...
6. Thus I want to suggest two basic reasons behind the need for self-examination—[1] to lament past sin, and [2] to prevent future sin...
7. Notice [1] to lament past sin, Lam.3:40—“let us search out and examine our ways, and turn back to the LORD...”
8. Let us search out and examine the past day—were we good stewards with our time—what sins were we guilty of—did we walk and communion with God...
9. Did we love God with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength—did we love our neighbor as we love ourselves...
10. But we mustn’t be content with merely identifying past sins but we must lament them—we must be humbled because of them—and we must repent from them...
11. James 4:9—“lament and mourn and weep! Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom...”
12. Yet—we mustn’t only lament our past sins we need to flee to Christ for fresh supplies of grace and forgiveness...
13. Thus James continues in the next verse, v10—“Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and He will lift you up...”
14. This was found back in Lam.3:40—“let us search out and examine our ways, and turn back to the LORD...”
15. Having searched our hearts and examined our ways—we are to then—“turn back to the LORD”—we need to daily humble ourselves before God...
16. Thus self-examination becomes a means of grace as it humbles us before God, Jas.4:6—“God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble...”
17. Notice [2] to prevent future sin, Ps.139:23-24—“search me, O God, and know my heart; try me...and see if there is any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting...”
18. Here David isn’t so much lamenting his past sins but cautious of future sins—“search me...and see if there is any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting...”
19. Now as to the actual practice of self-examination—I suggest it take place in conjunction with our meditation for its with the word that God searches us...
20. Heb.4:12—“for the word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword...and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart...”
21. I’m very hesitant to leave this point simply because at times people will examine themselves in such a way that leaves them depressed or discouraged...
22. But it must be bore in mind that self-examination is a means of grace—it’s purposes are two—[a] to lament past sins, and [b] to prevent future sins...
23. J. C. Ryle—“One thing essential to growth in grace is diligence in the use of private means of grace. By these I understand such means as a man must use by himself alone, and no one can use for him. I include under this head private prayer, private reading of the Scriptures, and private meditation and self-examination. The man who does not take pains about these three things must never expect to grow....Here is the whole reason why many professing Christians never seem to get on. They are careless and sloppy about their private prayers. They read their Bibles but little, and with very little heartiness of Spirit. They give themselves no time for self-inquiry and quiet thought about the state of their souls...”

II. Some Clarifications concerning Private Means

A. They must be consistently used

1. Here I want to focus in upon the consistency or regularity of our use of the private means of grace—I suggest these are to be daily...
2. I can illustrate this from Ex.16 where the Lord gives the Hebrews manna to eat, we read in v4—“Behold, I will rain bread from heaven for you. And the people shall go out and gather a day’s portion every day, that I may test them, whether they will walk in my law or not...”
3. Notice [a] the source of manner was God—“I will rain bread from heaven for you...”—God provided the manna for them...
4. Yet notice [b] the responsibility to get it was theirs—“and the people shall go out and gather a day’s portion every day...”
5. My friends—if we are going to grow we must every day gather grace for that particular day—yesterday’s manna will not satisfy today’s hunger...
6. Thus I want to digress for a few minutes and read several texts together—all underscoring the daily need for grace...
7. Prov.8:34—“blessed is the man who listens to me, watching daily at my gates, waiting at the posts of my doors...”
8. Matt.6:11—“give us this day our daily bread...”—which implies our prayers are to be offered as often as our needs...
9. Lk.9:23—“if anyone desires to come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow me...”
10. This is to say—we all have sins that need daily mortification—we need to daily deny or mortify our remaining flesh...
11. Heb.3:13—“...exhort one another daily, while it is called ‘Today,’ lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin...”
12. Here we are told to exhort one another daily—thus we need daily fellowship—daily exhortation—daily grace...

B. They must be beneficially used

1. Here I want to switch from quantity to quality—we must not only strive to be consistent but also benefited by the means of grace...
2. In other words—we need to do more than merely have our devotions—but we need to strive to find grace within them...
3. We have the tendency to view our devotions as a part of a long list that needs to be daily done—read our Bibles, take out the trash, mow the grass, and clean the house...
4. Here I want to clarify that—normally speaking the quality of our devotional life will vary much like the quantity...
5. By that I mean—there may be times when we read, study, and ponder our Bibles—only to feel like we benefited little or none...
6. Notice [1] don’t be discouraged if you don’t sense benefit—here I’m just being realistic—there will be times when our devotions seem mechanical...
7. But what we must be cautious of—is thinking merely in terms of feeling—just because we don’t feel like we’ve benefited doesn’t necessarily mean we haven’t...
8. Notice [2] pray to God that you would be benefited—by this I mean we must plead with God that we would have dealings with Him through these means...
9. Ps.119:18—“open my eyes, that I may see wondrous things from your law...”—that is—don’t allow me to read your word and be no better for it...
10. Ps.119:169—“let my cry come before you, O LORD; give me understanding according to your word...”—that is—he wasn’t content with merely praying but wanted to be heard...
11. Notice [3] strive with God that you would be benefited—this can be illustrated by Jacob while wrestling with the Angel of the LORD...

12. Gen.36:26—“I will not let you go unless you bless me!...”—thus in must strive in our Scripture intake and prayers—wrestling with the Lord until He blesses us...
- C. They must be purposefully used
1. Here I simply want to remind you something that I mentioned last week—means of grace [both public and private] are a means to Christ...