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The Way Of Spiritual Growth

by T. Austin-Sparks

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Before we can or will consider the laws of spiritual growth, we need to have a real concern for that growth. There must be in us a strong sense of its importance and necessity. We must realize in a living way that:

1. The measure of our ultimate satisfaction to the Lord will be the measure of the fulness of Christ.
2. The measure of our value to others will depend entirely upon our own spiritual measure: not merely upon what we believe, or think, or say.
3. The measure of our own joy and satisfaction will be according to what fulness of Christ we know and live in.

Because these three things constitute the whole nature of, and reason for, our being called "*into the fellowship of His (God's) Son*", the New Testament is ninety percent occupied with the growth and maturity of believers.

As there are definite laws of growth in the physical and mental man, so there are in that of the "inward man". Some of these are quite obvious, such as proper and suitable food, pure air, regular exercise, and systematic self-discipline. To violate or neglect any of these laws of body and mind is to arrest development, limit capacity, and open the door to adverse and destructive elements.

There are corresponding laws - the counterpart of the above - in the spiritual life, with similar effects for good or ill in observance or neglect. We are not taking up these particular factors here, but are specifying three other - although related - laws of spiritual growth. The first of these is

That Unattractive Thing - Obedience.

No one naturally likes that word. It is unpleasant from infancy onward. Its very essence seems to imply the presence of - at least - a peril of disobedience, and the universal natural dislike of it more than implies - it proves - the presence of a wish to be free from any obligation or law. Yes, that primeval revolt, and break from God which was the beginning of actual sin has entered as the Serpent's poison into the very blood-stream of the entire creation, and the very mention of obedience stirs a secret dislike, if not resentment.

It would take too much space to show how, through all time, the one thing which has been God's supreme obstacle to man's relationship with Himself has been this inherent disobedience as the active expression of unbelief. On the other hand, it would take volumes to show fully how every movement into fellowship with God in His great purposes has been based upon a demanded obedience of faith; a test, a challenge and a conflict issuing in a willing capitulation to the Divine will in some general or particular direction. Here, our only intention is to point out and emphasize the fact that there is no possibility of the slightest true and genuine spiritual progress and growth beyond the point where light received, the Lord showing His mind, has not had a definite response in practical obedience. Time does not change this, and no matter how long we go on or imagine that the matter is passed over, when at length the real question of approval for particular usefulness arises, we shall be brought right back to the hindrance of that reserved obedience. It is like the presence and secret working of some injury in the physical system which flares up when a particular demand is made years after. God does not live in time. All past and future is present with Him.

But there is a realm of obedience which is not law but love, and love transforms the unlovely to delight. Hence the Apostle Paul, in calling for an obedience which would make possible a spiritual enlargement, puts the matter on the basis of love, and then gives the supreme Example of the obedience of love. "Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ, Who... became obedient" (Phil. 2:5). It is those whose love for the Lord leads to swift actions in relation to light received, who make swift progress, and are seen to grow up in beauty before the Lord. On the other hand, those who are careless or rebellious when the Lord has spoken, and tardy in response - practical response - are marked by repeated defeats, recurrent bouts of spiritual cloudiness, and inability to meet an emergency demand when it arises. Too often this lack of obedience, or positive disobedience, is due to its origin in Satan - Pride.

The second thing to be mentioned here is

That Unrecognized Thing - Adjustableness.

One of the most common causes of spiritual stultification is fixedness. It is peculiarly common in the realm where Christian truth has been reduced to a fixed form, order, system, and creed. The doctrines of Christianity are such and such; so many. The accepted and established ideas of Christian service and methods are so-and-so. Peter had his fixed position as to Jews and Gentiles, and, because of it, came perilously near missing the larger purpose of God, and presented the Lord with a real battleground in his Christianity. It has so very largely resolved itself into a finality of

position, which results in a closed door to fuller revelation as to what God means by His Word. The fact is, that God only gives us enough light to get us to take the next step, but when that step has been taken, we are in the way of being shown that much more was meant by the Lord than He showed then. The first expectations of many servants of the Lord in the Bible, expectations resultant from something said by the Lord to them, were later seen to have been not all that He really meant, but there was something more, and perhaps other than they thought.

Can anyone really dispute that full light very often means a shedding of things and ideas that *we thought* were of God? Is it not true that, as we *go on*, we find that certain leadings of the Lord were tactical, intended to get us to a certain place where alone we could learn of a greater necessity? There is very much of this kind of thing in relation to both doctrine, practice, and service - its nature and ways, and while Divine *principles* will never change to all eternity, the clothing of those principles may vary and change with both dispensations and generations and stages of our own lives.

In all this - while *Truth* remains unalterable - the only way to grow is to be adjustable and not static and fixed. Do your religious traditions bind you in such a way that you are not free to move with God? If He sees this to be so, He may not give you the light necessary to enlargement. But if He sees that, although you may be in a *comparatively* false position, your heart is really set on His fulness at any cost, He may present you with light which will test your adjustableness severely. See the case of the disciples of John the Baptist transferring their discipleship to Christ. See the case of Peter and what happened in the home of Cornelius. See also the case of Apollos in Acts 18:24 - 28; as also the disciples mentioned earlier in that chapter.

Our third principle of growth is

That Crisis Point Of Committal.

Very often the whole mounting avalanche of Divine working in our lives - an avalanche built up as silently and slowly as the added snowflakes in the Alps - just waits to move with power and overwhelming for that final - yet all-inclusive - act of committal. We wait; we think, wrestle, contemplate, analyze, go round-and-round; we reason and argue; we recognize that there is nothing else for it, and even say so; we even come to the point when the matter is settled in our conviction and acceptance, and we think that we are over the hedge, but nothing happens, nothing eventuates. Why is it? The Lord knows more than we do about the deceitfulness of our hearts. A covenant has two sides, and in the Old Testament two sacrifices were connected with a covenant; one representing God, the other the offerer; *both* were killed and the two parties to the covenant were represented as passing between the two (See Abraham in Gen. 15). There has to be a slaying of something *on our side!* In other words, God is waiting until we have burned our boats behind us. Though we may have approached the shore of His will and way for us, there will be nothing from God's side while our boats are just left on the shore so that, if things don't go quite as we expect, we still can retreat. That boat is an evidence of doubt or reservation. It must be burned, so that - whatever the consequence - we have no alternatives.

The young believer will not grow unless he or she makes a committal in testimony, so letting others know where they stand. The law holds good in every stage of development and progress. If *policy* governs, or fear, or how such a step will affect our prospects, or any consideration which conflicts with what we know in our deepest hearts is the way indicated for us - for *us* - those things are boats or bridges representing a false "Safety-first" policy. As when the bleating lambs were

preserved by Saul - the finger of God will point to them and say, What mean those boats? God will wait for the full and final capitulation without a reservation, and to defer is only to be involved in confusion, and either becoming a misfit, having missed God's first best, or losing out altogether.