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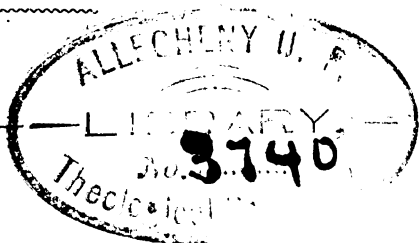
SERMONS BY THE MINISTERS

OF THE

FOUR SYNODS OF THAT DENOMINATION.

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EDITED BY

REV. JAMES PRESTLEY.  
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SERMON XIV.

SPIRITUAL LIFE.

BY REV. J. B. SCOULLER,

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"But grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ."

2 Peter 3: 18.

IN reference to the sinner's conversion to God, no theory precise and definite can be laid down; for independent of the Spirit's sovereignty, there are many circumstances to modify the experience of different individuals. Sometimes God sees fit so to bless pious training and godly example, that they issue in the gradual and progressive deepening of piety in the heart of the child, so that he glides imperceptibly into union and communion with Jesus, bearing in his soul no traces of past conflicts. He is conscious that he loves God, and sincerely endeavors to keep his commandments because of that love; and yet his memory supplies him with no data by which to judge when or how this constraining love was enthroned in his affections. It was doubtless thus with Timothy, "whose unfeigned faith dwelt first in" his grandmother Lois, and his mother Eunice; for God had promised in the covenant of grace, "I will establish my covenant between me and thee, and thy seed after thee, in their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be a God unto thee, and to thy seed after thee."

More generally, however, the Spirit acts with such marked effects, that the sinner's conscience can distinctly trace the successive steps of his return to God. He is roused from his spiritual lethargy by a strong conviction of his unworthiness, and the odiousness of his sins. His soul is troubled with a sickening apprehension that the rejected love, and despised mercy, of God will not, cannot, forget past transgressions, and bestow pardon upon such a prince of sinners. Events long since forgotten are now brought back to the mind with painful freshness; and the past of life weighs upon the conscience night and day with crushing power. These sorrows and convictions continue with various degrees of intensity, and for a greater or less length of time; when gradually, or, more generally, suddenly light from on high breaks upon the benighted soul, and fills the heart with joy ecstatic. The convert now enjoys a calm and comforting peace, which leads him to entertain high hopes, or revel in the full assurance that God has pardoned, and that Jesus will save him.

The experience of different individuals in reference to conversion, is so modified by different degrees of previous knowledge, variety of temperaments, and combinations of present circumstances, that no Christian is warranted in measuring a brother by his own experience. God would thus seem to teach us that the work was his, and that the glory should be given to Him.

After the convulsive throes of conversion are past, a new state of spiritual existence commences; and however much it may be diversified with sun and shade, mountain and valley, there is a great degree of uniformity in the experience of different individuals. In entering upon this new state, all are destined to experience sooner or later a bitter disappointment; for the peace of mind enjoyed at this time leads the inexperienced convert to flatter himself, that as Satan has been dislodged from his strong hold in the heart, the victory has been won, and that henceforth a life of sweet and uninterrupted communion with God awaits him. But he is soon waked from his dream of peace by the workings of sin within,

and the assaults of Satan without; and henceforth he is destined to suffer all the annoyance of a guerrilla warfare waged against him by the world; the flesh, and the devil. And he is astonished to find that it is by communications of grace under these very trials and sorrows, that his spiritual strength is increased, and he enabled to walk more closely with his God.

The *nature*, the *cultivation*, and the *difficulties* of this new spiritual life, in working out the sanctification of the soul, will constitute the themes of discourse upon the present occasion

I. The *nature* of spiritual life.

It may be well here briefly to premise that spiritual life does not consist in a mere external service. However commendable it may be in a moral view, to attend regularly upon the public services of religion; go through all the external forms of public and private devotion; liberally support Christianity in all the different departments of its operations; take an interest in religious things; and even live honestly and morally; yet the existence of all these does not necessarily imply that there is spiritual life. The latter it is true cannot exist without the former; but the former can and often do exist without the latter. For Satan, feeling his inability to quench the operations of the Holy Spirit, loves to lull the thoughtless into a false and often fatal security, by counterfeiting the Spirit's work.

Of the *essence* of this new life we know nothing. Jesus has himself declared, "The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth: so is every one that is born of the Spirit." It is one of those mysteries, the understanding of which God has reserved to himself: and where the Spirit is silent, it would be presumptuous for us to speculate. Our ignorance upon this subject is however no argument against the existence of such a life; for its nature and manifestations are distinctly and strongly marked in the believer's experience: showing that the essence of religion is neither mere sentiment or emotion, but an active, progressive, and controlling principle

of life. A similar mystery is to be found in the natural world. No philosopher, however learned, can tell what life is; and yet we all know that it does not consist in the mere actions of the body, or the exercises of the mind. Just so with spiritual life. New views and altered feelings assure the Christian that an essential change has occurred, and that he is animated by a new principle of life; however ignorant he may be of the essence of that life, having been brought by a way he knew not.

The *exercises* of this life are spontaneous. Every manifestation of life has some peculiar functions, the exercise of which is an essential part of that life. Thus the action of the lungs and the operations of the heart are not dependent upon the will; they are involuntary and spontaneous. So the mind in receiving impressions, comparing, and deducing, never feels the weight of force or necessity. These exercises are essential to the very being of mind. Even sleep, which binds up the senses in forgetfulness, has no bands with which to fetter the exercises of the mind. The affections are governed by the same law. They cluster around an object, because they perceive something lovely in that object; and scorn the interference of physical or mental force. The same general law of life causes the believer to offer to God a homage which springs unbidden from the heart. The child of God delights in the things of God, receives the word with gladness, and rejoices when they say to him, let us go into the house of the Lord; for his soul thirsteth after God, yea his heart and his flesh crieth out for the living God; and he would rather be a door-keeper in the house of his God than to dwell in the tents of wickedness. Hence those public, social, and private devotions of the formal professor, which are called forth by a mere sense of duty, or the convictions of conscience, are not pleasing to God, or profitable to the soul of the offerer; because they spring not from that love to God which manifests itself in spontaneous and joyful devotions.

This life is *progressive* in its nature. Faint and feeble at first, but constantly gathering strength, it gradually matures.

The character of this progression is distinctly marked out in the text. We are not only exhorted to "grow in grace," but also to grow "in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ." And our growth in grace will always correspond with the increase of our practical knowledge of our Lord and Saviour; for it is by this knowledge that we grow in grace. This progress must not be measured, as it too often is, by joy; for that exuberance of joy which springs from the sportive gambols of childhood, is rarely felt amid the richer pleasures of manhood; so that exquisite joy often felt at regeneration gradually declines, and yet the growth of grace continues. A decline in joyful feelings is so different from what the young convert expects, that he fears that religion is declining in his heart, when in reality his religion, which commenced as little more than an emotion, is maturing into a strong and fixed principle of life. The progress, therefore, which characterizes spiritual life, is not an increase, or even continuance, of joy; but "an increase of strength; strength of faith; strength of purpose; strength of principle; strength to do right, and to resist evil."

The manner in which progress is made in the divine life often staggers the faith of the young convert, and fills his heart with sadness. As his knowledge of his Lord and Saviour increases, he gains a clearer insight into the evils of his heart and the corruptions of his nature; and his first conclusion is that he is constantly growing worse and worse, for he sees more and more over which to sorrow: whereas these new insights into the evils which have *always* existed in his heart, only mark the growth of grace. Job understood well this operation of grace, for when he sought higher attainments in the divine life, his prayer was "make me to know my transgression and my sin." And for the same object did David pray—"Search me, O God, and know my heart; try me, and know my thoughts; and see if there be any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting."

In this new life there is a *harmonious growth of all the graces of the Spirit*. If some of the members of the body were

to acquire the maturity of manhood, while others remained as in infancy, the result would be weakness and deformity. If some of the faculties of the mind were to gain strength and power, while others remained undeveloped, it would produce derangement which would render its possessor unfit for the active duties of life. A well-formed body, and a finely balanced mind require all their parts to be equally and harmoniously developed. The same is true of the soul. The image of God which is impressed upon it at the new birth, is equally impressed upon each of its faculties. Hence the good man must be kind as well as just, charitable as well as honest. All the graces of the Spirit must be equally vigorous, and equally ready to manifest themselves when suitable opportunities present themselves. Here is one of the surest tests of regeneration. The formalist may imitate some of the more common and manifest graces of the divine life; as honesty and benevolence: but he will fail in exhibiting the rarer gifts; as humility and reverence. And this lack of harmonious development is a strong evidence that there has been no spiritual birth, and that consequently there can be no spiritual life.

This spiritual life must *pervade the whole man*, soul, body, and mind; all must be sanctified, and consecrated to the service of God. "Yield your members as instruments of righteousness unto God." "Present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service." "Ye are bought with a price; therefore glorify God in your body, and in your spirit, which are God's." The influence of the body over the soul is such, that as long as lust and passion remain unrestrained and unmortified, the soul cannot grow in grace, and in the knowledge of Jesus Christ. The mind and body must be crucified to the world, before the soul can experience, and much less exhibit the spontaneous, progressive, and harmonious exercises of the divine life.

The *nature* of this spiritual life may still farther be explained, by the manifestations it makes of its own existence; for the tree is ever known by its fruits.

This new life manifests itself in *love to God*. Just so soon as the heart is renewed by the Holy Spirit, it instinctively turns to God, and rests with delight in the contemplation of his perfections; for its new desires can be gratified in no other way. But mark, this is not merely a love for the goodness and excellency which are associated with God, but a *personal* love for himself, fully recognizing his relations to us, and deeply feeling our dependence upon Him, and our obligations to Him. There are millions who love that goodness of the divine government which ministers to their wants and pleasures, and yet love not the Author of these bounties, and refuse to recognize his just relations to them.

The love to God of which I am speaking will produce submission to Him, in all the ways of his providence and of his grace. Clouds and darkness may gather around the Christian's pathway, sorrow and sadness may oppress his heart, disappointment and bereavement may meet him at every step in life, yet there is no murmur or complaint against the goodness and justice of God. The enmity and rebellion of the natural man have been crucified, so that with whatever bitters the cup of life may be drugged, when God presses it to the believer's lips, he freely drinks, and with his Saviour exclaims, "Even so, Father; for so it seemed good in thy sight." This love will not only produce submission to the will of God, but also *obedience* to all his commands. It is of the very nature of love to produce congeniality of mind; and if we love God, we must love what He loves, and hate what He hates. This oneness of affection must necessarily lead us to desire the accomplishment of his will; and if we desire, we will also labor and obey.

This spiritual life will manifest itself in *habitual self-denial*. Jesus has himself set us an example upon this subject, "for although He was rich, yet for our sakes He became poor, that we, through his poverty, might be rich." And his whole life showed how willingly He denied himself, and sacrificed all for the accomplishment of that glorious work He came to perform. Paul tells us that "the grace of God that bringeth

salvation, hath appeared to all men, teaching us, that denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly, in this present world." If we consider the circumstances with which we are surrounded, we will see the absolute necessity of thus denying ourselves, if we would be friends of God. The world is at enmity with heaven, and has "changed the truth of God into a lie, and worshiped and served the creature more than the Creator," and is thus calculated to draw us from our Lord and Saviour. If we would live the divine life, we must lay a strong and controlling hand upon the tyranny of fashion, the allurements of pleasure, and the lusts of passion. This self-denial must not be occasional and capricious in its exercise, but habitual and uncompromising.

This spiritual life will also manifest itself in a *growing conscientiousness* in regard to what are sometimes called *minor duties*. It is an old and true remark, that "little things are no trifles," for these are always the true indices of character. The great and important duties of life occupy our thoughts and attention so much, that in their performance we are careful and guarded, and thus enabled to conceal our true motives. But in regard to the minor duties, there is less attention and watchfulness, and consequently less concealment of motive and character. Such actions spring unbidden from the heart, and thus reveal its true condition. Spiritual life, which equally pervades the whole man, will be particularly manifested in a growing conscientiousness in reference to these minor duties: not because there is more grace connected with their performance, but because the world practices less deceit in regard to them. Thus setting forth in an unquestionable way the gracious state of that soul which regards and practices all duties, whether great or small, in the same spirit, and from the same motive. Satan, however, sometimes counterfeits this evidence of grace by a *scrupulous* conscience which haggles at the most innocent gratifications, and would banish from our enjoyment certain meats and pleasures which God has provided for his people. Of this counterfeit, beware.

II. The *cultivation* of this spiritual life. Or, the *means* of growth in grace.

Errors are taught upon this subject against which we should carefully guard. The natural man knows not the Spirit of God, and consequently seeks not his aid in striving after higher attainments in virtue. Many of the most popular works on moral philosophy have done much to poison the minds of men upon this subject, by treating of mere morality as something closely allied to religion, if not religion itself. Thus all distinction between mere morality without religion, and religion as the source of a moral and holy life, has become lost to a great extent. Hence the natural man builds his religion upon reason, enforces it by natural conscience and the fear of consequences, and trusts to the mere morality thus acquired as a passport to heaven, and a preparation for the full enjoyment of its pleasures. The church of Rome supplies us with an example of an effort to acquire holiness in this way. Claiming the right to legislate upon subjects of faith, and taking reason as her guide, she has decreed pilgrimages, fasts, penances, and a large round of rites and ceremonies, as the means of acquiring sanctity. The result, however, has been to debauch the morals of her members, and cause them to worship the creature more than the Creator. This same error of attempting to improve what Jesus and his apostles left perfect, is to be found more or less in every church. Exercising their judgment about matters of policy and mere expediency, they have all endeavored to bind the consciences of their people by rites and observances unknown to apostolic Christianity, and for which they cannot claim the authority, "Thus saith the Lord."

Reason, in these revolutionary times, has attempted a still bolder feat. To acquire supremacy of power, she has professed to be able to cure all the diseases of human depravity, without the assistance of the Church. At her bidding a thousand schemes of moral reform have started into being, as panaceas for all the ills of soul and body. And what has been the result? The streams of appetite and passion have,

in some instances, been forced into other and more secret channels; but the depraved heart remains untouched, and continues to bubble on, and sends forth its bitter and pestilential waters. . Instead of growth in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour, we find much positive injury accomplished, by turning away the hearts of men from Jesus, and pointing their hopes to human devices. While their souls remain aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers from the covenants of promise; and the ways of Zion are left to mourn, because few come to the solemn feasts.

The only true means of growth in grace is *union with Jesus, and the indwelling of his Spirit*. If we be united to Christ in his death, we will be made partakers of his life; and the Spirit of Him that raised him from the dead shall dwell in us, and cause us to bring forth fruit to the glory of God. Paul, in writing to the Romans, explains the consequences of this union thus: "Ye are not in the flesh, but in the Spirit, if so be that the Spirit of God dwell in you. Now if any man have not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of his. And if Christ be in you, the body is dead because of sin; but the Spirit is life because of righteousness. But if the Spirit of Him, that raised up Jesus from the dead, dwell in you, He that raised up Christ from the dead shall also quicken your mortal bodies by his Spirit that dwelleth in you. Therefore, brethren, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live after the flesh, for if ye live after the flesh ye shall die; but if ye through the Spirit do mortify the deeds of the body, ye shall live. For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, they are the sons of God." Of the nature of this union nothing has been revealed. Christ in his intercessory prayer asks that believers may be united to Him, in the same mysterious manner, in which He was united to the Father. Paul tells the Ephesians that "we are members of his (Christ's) body, of his flesh, and of his bones." But he adds, "this is a great mystery."

However mysterious this union may be, the manner in which it is to be sought and cultivated, is abundantly plain; for while God has kept the counsels of his wisdom, and the

operations of his Spirit as secrets of his own, He has made very clear the duties required of us. The universal law of God's moral government, is that every blessing must be sought through the proper use of divinely appointed means. If therefore, we would be united to Jesus, and be the possessors of his Spirit, and cultivate that union when attained, so that we may grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour, we must commence with a careful and diligent study of the word of God, for it is only thus that we can hope to know his will. In the performance of this duty we must not rest satisfied with a mere intellectual knowledge of the contents of the Bible; we must labor to have its truths impressed upon our hearts. It is to be feared that many become expert in biblical criticism and polemic theology, who remain strangers to the spirit and power of the Holy Scriptures. And we must not wonder at this, if we only consider the motives from which the Scriptures are too often perused. Some read the Scriptures frequently from the force of habit, or a sense of duty; because they were thus trained in youth. But they read with such listlessness that they fail to receive any impression whatever, unless it be a growing feeling that the Bible is of all books the most insipid and uninteresting. Others study the Scriptures that they may gather from them everything which may appear to confirm their favorite theory of theology, and thus be prepared to meet in argument any opponent. But by thus concentrating their entire attention upon but one subject, they fail to receive a proper impression of the whole. If we would study the Scriptures that we may thereby grow in grace, we must throw aside all other motives, and study them for the sole end of increasing our knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

Another means to be used in seeking this end is constant and fervent prayer to God, for the illumination and guidance of his Holy Spirit. But the nature and necessity of prayer, and its omnipotence in moving the God of heaven to bless, are so clearly revealed in the Scriptures, and have been so recently the theme of seven discourses from this pulpit, that

I shall pass this subject by at the present, merely reminding you that prayer is an essential means of growth in grace.

Again, if we would grow in grace and in union with Jesus, we must frequently and carefully examine our own hearts in the light of the Scriptures, and by the searching power of the Holy Spirit. It is only by ascertaining our past attainments that we can know present and future duties. If we neglect self-examination we will become lost and bewildered in our spiritual journey, and like Paul upon the Adriatic, when "exceedingly tossed with a tempest," we will be without sun by day, or stars by night, to tell us where to steer, that we may gain the haven of rest and safety. And although this examination may bring to light many painful things over which we may mourn, yet faithfulness to our own souls requires that we should be inexorable in this work, and shrink from no revelations; but bring the light of truth to shine upon the inmost recesses of the heart. For as long as sin lies concealed in any dark chamber of the soul it will fester and pollute, and thus effectually prevent any advance in the divine life.

There are other important means of growth in grace, to some of which time will only permit me to allude. We must attend diligently upon all the externals of religion in as proper a frame of spirit as we can command, and with a sincere and prayerful desire that they may be blessed by God to the upbuilding of Christ's kingdom in our hearts. We must exercise brotherly love and Christian charity towards others, without stopping to inquire whether they belong to our class, or business, or party, or denomination. We must do more and give more, recognizing that in all things we are the mere stewards of God's bounty, and should hold all we are, and have, as subject to his will. We should practice self-denial every day as the providence of God may give us opportunity, in such things as dress, pleasures, &c.

II. The *hinderances* or *difficulties* with which the Christian must contend in his spiritual life.

The chief hinderance is a practical disbelief of the doctrine of free grace, and a constant effort to build our hopes of

heaven upon the merit of something we have done. There is nothing which strikes the believer with so much wonderment and astonishment as the absolute freeness of the offer of pardon and salvation in the covenant of grace. It is so utterly inconsistent with what he anticipated, that he is unable to realize its truth; and it is only after he has been driven from every refuge of self-righteousness that he is able fully to understand the doctrine of free grace, and with recumbency of soul, cry, "Not by might nor by power, but by the Spirit of the Lord." Many true converts, in the first part of their Christian experience, are so deeply humbled under a sense of their extreme sinfulness, and liability to God's wrath, that judging of rewards and punishments after the manner of men, they cannot understand how God can pardon everything without some atonement from their hands; and their constant labor is to do something meritorious in return. Others whose humility and gratitude are less, but whose pride is greater, feel it to be their duty, not only as a matter of justice, but also as a matter of honor, to render to God some compensation for his kindness to them; and they vainly suppose that in their obedience and good works there is a merit by which they discharge to a certain extent their obligations to God. If we carefully examine our own hearts, we will find that from one or the other of these two principles, we are disposed to take to ourselves some credit for the occasional extra warmth of our devotions, or munificence of our charities. When we have made any particular sacrifice of labor or money in the cause of Christ, have we not detected a feeling rising within us, which, if permitted, would tell us that we have done even more than duty, and have a little whereof we might justly boast? When God has given to us more than usual freedom and power in prayer, is it not often followed by a peculiar feeling of self-satisfaction and self-glorying? All such practical disbelief of the absolute freedom of grace, and every effort to do something for ourselves, are injurious to our growth in grace. And yet, on the other hand, we must guard with equal care against all Antinomian errors, which would tell us that obedience and a holy life are not required because of the richness of gospel grace. The

truth upon this subject has been briefly taught by an old writer, who urges us to "use the means as vigorously as if we were to be saved by our own efforts, and yet trust as entirely to the grace of God, as if we made use of no means whatever."

Another, and a very serious hinderance to growth in grace is a *want of consistency in Christian character*. There is a growing feeling in the community which would restrict the themes of the pulpit to the mere abstractions of theology, enlivened by fancy and poetry. Hence an uneasiness is manifested in most audiences when the minister speaks with plainness about the infidel theories in science, the dishonest practices which custom has sanctioned in trade, and the constant sacrifices of principle which politics require of the partisan. The result of all this is a want of consistency in Christian character, a constant effort to confine religion to the Sabbath and the services of the sanctuary, and perchance a cold and formal prayer at the family altar; forgetful altogether that it is a pervading and controlling principle which shows itself in the workshop and at the polls in all the truthfulness and fidelity of its character.

Things being thus, we must not be astonished at those contradictory scenes which we are pained to witness every day; that of professors of the religion of Jesus weeping bitterly in the house of God, and then on the morrow go forth to their places of business, and overreach an ignorant and confiding neighbor in a bargain; or go to the polls, and forgetting their allegiance to Jesus, submit to all the rigors of party drill, and shout the loudest and labor the hardest in elevating to place and power some heaven-daring, Sabbath-breaking infidel; and then dare to hope that God would bless that wicked ruler, and make him a terror to evil-doers, and a blessing to his country. As long as we shift our religion thus to suit circumstances, as we shift our outer garment to suit the weather, we must not expect to grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

Passing by many other hinderances which will readily suggest themselves to any reflective mind, I shall notice but one more; a difficulty with which ministers and Sabbath school

teachers have to contend,—*an unsanctified familiarity with the Bible*. A careful study of the Scriptures, that the truth may make an impression upon the heart, is one of the principal means of grace, and this the biblical instructor is in danger of losing, unless he be exceedingly careful and guarded. Forced by his profession to study the Scriptures every day, that he may be enabled to expound them to others, he becomes familiar with the Bible as a text-book, and is in danger of regarding it in the light of a mere text-book, and thus fail to feel upon his own heart those impressions of its truth, which he labors to impress upon the hearts of others. This is doubtless the painful experience of many a minister and Sabbath school teacher; and yet while we study the Bible thus, we cannot grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, with that rapidity which our privileges require us to do.

As the subject has been practical throughout, I shall only briefly add in *conclusion*, that by thus growing in grace we secure to ourselves the greatest earthly happiness, for the peace which springs from union with Jesus passeth all understanding; and the pleasures which are excited by the indwelling Spirit possess a richness and permanence which are unknown to the purest joys of earthly origin. We are also encouraged in our efforts after higher attainments in the divine life by the fact that our labor shall not be in vain. Although the soul is made perfect in holiness when it passes from earth to heaven, yet its capacity for higher and higher attainments will constantly and rapidly increase, as the ceaseless ages of eternity circle away. There will be different grades of perfect happiness in heaven, as there are different capacities and attainments on earth; so that the more we grow in grace in this life, the greater will be our capital with which we shall commence the joys and glories of the eternal world. Whatever our other attainments and possessions in life may be, let us, therefore, make it the great and constant object of our earthly mission to “grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.” Amen.