

Growth

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[0 : 00] So, in our study of J.C. Ryle's book, Holiness, we've come to the chapter simply titled, Growth. And I'd like to take a page from pretty much every book on writing I've ever read, and I've read quite a few of them.

If you want to write a book, they say, well, some writing experts will tell you to create a detailed outline all the way through. Some will tell you to have the main ideas in your head, but just start writing, see what comes out.

But regardless of which method you choose, a surprising number of them will tell you to write the ending of the book before you write the beginning of the book. That way, you always know where you're going, and it makes the entire process a lot easier.

So, my question that I would like to pose this morning is, where are we as Christians going? What do we hope to have in the end?

Where do we hope to end up? What does the end look like for us? And to answer those questions, go with me, if you will, to Romans chapter 8. I'll read a familiar passage in Romans 8, which begins at verse 28.

[1 : 13] Paul writes, And those whom he called, he also justified. So here we see the various parts of the book, Now, what is the end?

Now, what is the believer's end according to Paul in this passage?

Now, most of us would probably jump to glorification, right? And that is correct. But look again at the text. Paul essentially defines what he means by glorification here.

Verse 29 again, In other words, God predetermined our destiny, our destination, which is ultimately to be conformed to the image of his son, Jesus Christ.

That is essentially what it means to be glorified. That is essentially what it means to be glorified, or at least all of these parts of salvation once put together. To be glorified is to be conformed to the image of Jesus Christ.

[2 : 50] In the story of God's redeemed people, that's the ending. That's the goal. That's where we're headed. That is God's plan and his purpose for us, and everything from predestination to justification and beyond, are means by which he gets us to that place where we are perfectly, thoroughly conformed to the image of Christ.

There appears, however, to be something missing in Paul's list here. Practically speaking, there's a pretty big gap between justification and glorification.

What I mean is, I don't know about you, but when I first believed and was justified, I didn't walk away from that experience perfectly conformed to the image of Christ.

Two decades later, I am still far from perfectly conformed to his image, and I don't think I'm alone here. You won't find a saint on this earth, past or present, who bears the likeness of Christ thoroughly and completely, right?

Even the great apostle Paul confessed in the previous chapter, wretched man that I am. What I want to do right, evil lies close at hand. On another occasion, he described himself as the foremost or the chief of sinners.

[4 : 14] For those of us still living on this earth, still contending with our sinful flesh, assuming we are contending, Paul said again in the previous chapter, I delight in the law of God in my inner being, but I see in my members another law waging war against the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members.

True believers are at war with themselves. If we are justified by faith in Christ, we are in a perpetual battle with our own flesh.

Our regenerated hearts want to do right, while our flesh continually wants to sin. So there's this constant tension, and that's what I mean by this contending with our sinful flesh.

So for those of us that are still in this struggle, living somewhere between our justification and our future glorification, we should want to know what we are, where we are, and what we are doing, right?

What happens between these two stages? So for now, just keep this verse in mind, those whom God foreknew, he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his son.

[5 : 26] That's the ending for every justified believer in Christ. Now, I've noticed something else about my justification. Looking back at the time I first believed and trusted in Christ for my salvation, I can't help but notice that God did not immediately whisk me away into heaven.

I can't help but notice that he left me here. He didn't call me, justify me, save me, and promptly take me away from my glorification.

That's not what happened. Instead, he left me here. He's left me here for two decades and counting, and I really don't know how long he will leave me here. But my question is, why do you suppose that is?

If we're saved, why not just go all the way in an instant? Consider Israel's story in the book of Exodus.

After God rescued the people of Israel from their enslavement in Egypt, he did not lead them straight into the promised land, right? Far from it, he made them wander in the wilderness for 40 years.

[6 : 38] Why do you think that was? Why didn't he? I mean, he did save them to dwell in the promised land, so, excuse me, I'm having trouble with my voice this week. I've done a lot of talking.

Why then would God rescue them from their slavery in Egypt, only to have them struggle through the wilderness for the next four decades?

Perhaps a better question would be, what was happening during those 40 years? What was God doing during that time? He was teaching the people of Israel, wasn't he?

He was providing his law. He was, at times, disciplining them. He was pruning them as a people. In short, I believe he was preparing them to be the kind of people they should be once they entered the promised land.

I believe the same is true for us. Outside of rare exceptions, like the thief on the cross, or maybe those who turned to Christ on their deathbed, we have to spend our time in the wilderness.

[7 : 47] God redeems us from the bondage of sin, just as he rescued Israel from their slavery in Egypt, but he doesn't take us right into heaven. We remain here for a while to learn, and we grow.

God disciplines us. He teaches us. He prunes us. He refines us. In a word, he sanctifies us. He sets us apart from the rest of the world more and more, little by little.

We become increasingly holy as time passes. We become more and more like Christ. God slowly but surely prepares us to be the kind of people we will be when our day of glorification comes.

Paul puts it as succinctly as possible, I think, in 1 Thessalonians 4, when he writes, Finally then, brothers, we ask and urge you in the Lord Jesus that as you receive from us how you ought to walk and to please God just as you were doing, that you do so more and more.

For you know what instructions we gave you through the Lord Jesus, for this is the will of God, your sanctification. Please notice that Paul is writing to people who are already striving to please God and to walk in obedience to him, yet he wants them, as he says, to do more and more.

[9 : 20] Then he makes this straightforward declaration. This is the will of God. People ask this question a lot. What is the will of God for my life? Here it is. Your sanctification. Sanctification.

Clearly, he's not referring to our ultimate sanctification at the end of time. He's talking about a kind of practical, everyday sanctification we experience even now.

He's talking about that gap between our justification and our glorification. He's talking about our 40 years in the wilderness as we learn and we grow and we become increasingly holy.

Now, most of you are probably thinking, this is all rather obvious. Of course, God is sanctifying us. Of course, we want to be molded into the image of Christ.

The thing is, though, there were people in J.C. Ryle's day, which he alludes to, just as there are people in our day who actually don't believe that, either mentally in their theology or practically in the way they live.

[10 : 22] They don't believe in what we sometimes refer to as a progressive sanctification. Several years ago, I was teaching a Bible study on the subject of sanctification, and during the lesson, I drew a graph on the marker board behind me, and it had a line that went across to represent the spiritual growth and the holiness of your typical Christian.

And the line, to be clear, was very jagged. It was inconsistent as it rose and fell, it went up, and then it dropped back down again, and then it went up again. But if you stood back and looked at it, you would see that the line more or less went upward as time went on.

Now, not long after, I was contacted by the pastor of another church who saw my notes from the lesson online that was on the church website, and he wrote to me because he wanted to voice his objections.

Specifically, he objected to any notion that implies God's redeemed people are being practically and progressively sanctified throughout their lives.

In fact, he called that teaching irresponsible because, according to him, it gives people the wrong idea that they are actually working for their salvation. So let me be clear right now, that's not what we're talking about.

[11 : 43] Not at all. What did Paul say? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh? Absolutely not. The answer is no. The doctrine of progressive sanctification does not imply we are working to gain or even secure our salvation.

Perhaps this is why Ryle chose 2 Peter 3.18 as his starting text. Peter writes, Grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

So when we talk about growing in holiness and becoming more and more conformed to the image of Christ, what we are really talking about is growing in the grace of God.

Growing in grace. We are growing in grace, and we are growing by grace. Let me show you. In Hebrews 10, the author quotes from Jeremiah 31, who quotes God himself, who said, This is the covenant that I will make with them after those days.

I will put my laws on their hearts and write them on their minds. Similarly, Ezekiel foretold, I will give you a new heart and a new spirit I will put within you, and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh.

[13 : 08] And I will put my spirit within you and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules. For years, Israel failed to keep God's commandments.

They failed to remain loyal to him, despite their many vows and promises. Time and time again, God showed them mercy. He granted them repentance, only to watch them fall again into sin and rebellion over and over again.

So finally, he announces the new covenant through his prophets, such as Jeremiah and Ezekiel. And what does he say? If I may paraphrase, he says, You will not obey me.

You will never be able to keep my commandments. You will continue to fail over and over again, as you've already proven to do so. So here's what I'm going to do.

I will do what I have always intended to do. I will give you a new heart. I will put my spirit within you. Why? Well, frankly, if you want something done right, you've got to do it yourself.

[14 : 13] That may not always be true for us, but it certainly is of God. And he says, I will cause you to walk in my statutes and to be careful to obey my rules. I will give you what you need in order to follow the commandments I have given you.

So when we talk about growing in holiness or growing in grace, no one is suggesting that we are working for salvation. This is by God's grace, all by God's grace.

And I will also add that we are not working to become more saved or more justified, if such a thing were even possible, through various means, which I'll talk about in just a moment, God sovereignly and providentially moves his people to become increasingly holy.

By his grace, he nourishes us to grow in grace. Granted, we do not all grow at the same pace. I think we know that.

We do not all reach the same heights, J.C. Ryle says, quote, when I speak of growth in grace, I only mean increase in the degree, size, strength, vigor, and power of the graces which the Holy Spirit plants in a believer's heart.

[15 : 27] I hold that every one of those graces admits of growth, progress, and increase. I hold that repentance, faith, hope, love, humility, zeal, courage, and the like may be little or great, strong or weak, vigorous or feeble, and may vary greatly in the same man at different periods of his life.

When I speak of a man growing in grace, I mean simply this, that his sense of sin is becoming deeper, his faith stronger, his hope brighter, his love more extensive, his spiritual mindedness more marked.

He feels more of the power of godliness in his own heart. He manifests more of it in his life. He is going on from strength to strength, from faith to faith, and from grace to grace.

I leave it to others to describe such a man's condition by any words they please. For myself, I think the truest and best account of him is this, he is growing in grace.

As branches on the vine of Christ, we are supplied with life, and a vital sign of that life is growth and fruitfulness. Jesus said, I am the vine, you are the branches.

[16 : 37] Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me, you could do nothing. And what does he say about those who bear no fruit? Every branch in me that does not bear fruit, he takes away, thrown into the fire and burned.

My point is that scripture not only exhorts us to grow, but it also denies any notion that believers will fail to grow. Even when we aren't growing for a season, Jesus says, every branch that does bear fruit, he prunes, that it may bear more fruit.

This is the will of God, your sanctification. Now, since I've spent a fair amount of time addressing the reality of our spiritual growth, let me share with you a few reasons why it's important that we acknowledge this fact.

First, spiritual growth is the best evidence of spiritual life. And I won't say much about this now because we're all devotes an entire subject to the subject of assurance, which we'll come to next week.

Suffice it to say that nothing better demonstrates life than growth. As Ryle says, in a child or a flower or a tree, we are all aware that when there is no growth, there is something wrong.

[17 : 50] Healthy life in an animal or vegetable will always show itself by progress and increase. By the way, this is one of the dangers of denying the doctrine of progressive sanctification or growth and grace.

There are plenty of people today who believe they are saved but they bear no fruit and they show no signs of life. Even so, some pastors may come along and would be more than willing to assure them that they must be saved because maybe they made a profession of faith or something along those lines.

Paul, on the other hand, would say, examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves or do you not realize this about yourselves that Jesus Christ is in you unless indeed you fail to meet the test?

And what is that test? Growth in holiness is at least one part of it. Hebrews 12 says, strive for the holiness, strive for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord.

Similarly, 1 John says, everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure. If we want evidence of life, if we want assurance of salvation, we should expect to see spiritual growth in ourselves.

[19 : 09] Second, the reality of growth is important because it brings us so much joy and so much peace to experience that growth. If, however, we deny the reality of spiritual growth, we won't have assurance and we'll deprive ourselves of that joy and peace.

Revelation says, blessed or happy is the one who stays awake keeping his garments on. So happy is the one who stays vigilant, not apathetic, vigilant.

Happy is the one who strives to learn more and more about his Lord and his Savior and follow him as closely as possible. Happy is that person. Third, the reality of growth makes us useful in Christ's kingdom.

Someone who is not growing is probably not doing much good for the Lord's cause, for the church, or even the world around him. He has little chance of encouraging fellow believers or being a positive influence to unbelievers.

Fourth, our spiritual growth pleases God. Just as a farmer is excited to see the fruit of his labor at harvest time, God is pleased to see our spiritual fruit.

[20 : 34] Jesus said, by this my Father is glorified that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples. Now, in the time remaining, I want to address the practical side of this.

We all want to know, number one, whether we are growing and number two, how to grow, right? So first, how do we know we are growing? Well, chances are you are not the same person you were when you first believed.

I hope that's the case. You've learned since then. You've grown since then. If you examine your former self in light of your present self, you will likely see some notable changes in the way that you think, in the way that you behave.

For example, I didn't have many Christian friends when I first became a believer myself, so I continued to spend a lot of time with my unbelieving friends.

I had certainly changed, but I was still in the process of changing, of course, so when my friends wanted to go out, let's say, to the bars and drink, I'd go with them. I wouldn't drink, but I'd still go with them.

[21 : 49] As time passed, however, I found myself not wanting to hang out with them quite so much. I didn't not only want to avoid drinking, I wanted to avoid the places where they would spend their time.

I didn't want to be in those environments that made me feel uncomfortable and it wasn't long before I would rather spend my time at the church with people twice my age than with my former friends.

How do we know we're growing? Well, how much have we changed? Specifically, how much have we changed for the better? How much more do we look like Christ than when we first began? Because that's the measuring stick, right?

Keep in mind that often the people closest to us have a much better vantage point than we do of ourselves. As much as I may strive to examine myself on a daily basis, it would be particularly useful if I just turned to my wife and say, how am I doing?

Better yet, let me share with you something Danae and I have done since we were married. We actually keep a shared notebook full of letters to one another. It's just an ordinary notebook, but whenever either one of us has a concern or a confession or a word of affirmation, we write a letter to the other person in the notebook and we leave it out so they can read it, which actually helps to facilitate conversations later on.

[23 : 21] I may not want to admit out loud that I've recently been an impatient guy around the house, but I can write it down and then we can talk about it. I mention our notebook because it has proven to be a great resource for measuring our spiritual growth, not only as individuals, but as a couple, when we read back through it and we see all of those concerns that we voiced and those confessions that we made to one another in the past, it becomes much clearer how much we've grown or maybe how much we haven't.

If we're still struggling with the same things, then obviously we're not doing so hot in that area. I suppose an individual journal would accomplish something similar, but I think the shared notebook provides an additional layer of accountability, perhaps, perspective.

It's helped us anyhow, so I throw it out there. Let's be specific, though. Ryle provides a list of six areas worth examining to see whether we've grown as disciples of Christ, and this is not an exhaustive list, but extremely helpful nonetheless.

One mark of growth is increased humility. After we've been Christians a little while, we all face the temptation of becoming a little self-righteous.

We may develop a pharisaical, holier-than-thou attitude, thinking, you know, we've arrived, we're holy now, we've got our act together, we're Christians. We may begin to feel qualified to judge others a bit harsher, and to commend ourselves and our righteousness a bit more, but that's certainly not the pattern of the saints in Scripture.

[24 : 59] Again, the Apostle Paul confessed, wretched man that I am. When John the Baptist reached the height of his ministry, when his popularity was at its height, he starts pointing people away from himself.

Christ must increase, and I must decrease. Though it may seem counterintuitive to much of the world, our pride and our self-righteousness should decrease as we grow.

Our humility should increase, we should become increasingly affected by our sin. We should become increasingly aware of our sinfulness. Rather than growing more self-righteous, we should grow more dependent on Christ and his grace.

Now, another mark of growth is increased faith and love toward Christ. Our affection for him should run deeper. Our trust in him should grow stronger.

Much like a husband and wife grow closer together over the years, as the bride of Christ, we should grow closer to him. And I realize this one can be a little difficult to measure. As for our love, perhaps we should consider how much time and attention we give our bridegroom.

[26 : 14] That's one place to start. How often do we sit at the Lord's feet and listen to his teaching? How much time do we spend learning about him and his word and his will for us? How much time do we spend meditating on him or praying to him?

As for our faith, I think our response to trials and difficulties probably serves as a pretty good test. It's easy to trust in God when everything is going right. But what about when things are going wrong?

When things are not working out the way we want it to? What is our impulsive response in moments like that? In moments of difficulty? Do we respond like Paul and say, I will boast gladly of my weaknesses so that the power of Christ may rest upon me?

Is that how we respond? Or is it something else? Do we begin cursing and fuming, forgetting God's abundant grace and failing to trust his will? How did you respond to trials a year ago?

How do you respond to them today? Obviously only you can answer this, but are you growing? A third mark of growth is increased holiness in the ways that we think speak and behave.

[27 : 26] As J.C. Ryle says, the man whose soul is growing gets more dominion over sin, the world, and the devil every year. He becomes more careful about his temper, his words, and his actions.

He is more watchful over his conduct in every relation of life. He strives more to be conformed to the image of Christ in all things. To be clear, our trajectory toward bearing the image of Christ is not a straight line.

I believe we may continually move upward, but we don't move upward without falling back once in a while. I remember a short video a friend sent to me a few years ago of an elderly gentleman trying to step onto an escalator, and I don't know whether it was his first time or not, but it did not go well.

He took a step, and somehow as the escalator continued to move his feet up, he fell backwards, but he landed on the escalator. So he's still moving up as he's fumbling around down the steps, climbing up a couple.

I mean, it was a huge mess, but the caption under the video said sanctification. And I think there's a lot of truth to that video. As we flail around doing our best to become a holier people, God is slowly but surely moving us in the right direction despite ourselves, right?

[28 : 45] Now, a fourth mark of growth is an increased desire for holy things. We may join in on worship on Sunday morning, but has our love and our desire for worship grown?

We may read through the Bible in a year, but has it become less of a chore and more of a thrill to us? As growing, maturing Christians, our affections begin to shift away from the things that we formerly loved to Christ and to holy things more and more as time passes.

A fifth mark of growth is increased charity. Ryle adds a sixth mark, which he calls increased zeal and diligence in trying to do good to souls, but I'm going to put these two together for the sake of time.

In short, if we are growing as Christians, our love for one another should be growing as well. And whether our charity comes in the form of material good or spiritual good, whether we are providing food and clothing or sharing the gospel with a soul in need, our love for others should increase with time.

Now, I don't know whether I can stress this mark enough, but I just want to point out that when we think of holiness, a lot of times we have a tendency to think about mostly so-called religious activities.

[30 : 08] We think about going to church. We think about reading the Bible. We think about praying and so on. And all of those are wonderful, holy things, but they are not the only things that fall into this category of holiness.

Think of the Pharisees. They excelled at practicing their religion, but Jesus said, woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, for you tithe mint and dill and cumin.

I mean, they're given 10% to God out of their herb garden. That's pretty meticulous. However, Jesus says, you have neglected the weightier matters of the law, justice, mercy, and faithfulness.

They were meticulous about their religion, but as it turns out, their religion was incomplete, woefully incomplete. And we could turn to many places in scripture to learn that selfless care for others, spiritually, physically, is a vital mark of holiness.

After all, Jesus, he's the embodiment of absolute holiness, right? And he loved us and gave himself up for us as a sacrifice to God.

[31 : 14] Actually, Paul goes on to say, therefore, be imitators of him. Now, with the time remaining, we don't have a lot of time, but I'll attempt to answer that second question I asked.

How do we grow? What is the means of our growth? Again, I can't provide you with an exhaustive list, but here are a few things that I think will be helpful. First, we should make use of what Ryle refers to as private means of grace.

He's referring to those spiritual activities that we can do alone, praying, reading, studying scripture, meditating, self-examination. This is a crucial part. Remember that we have to make time for these things.

Our time just doesn't open up to us. We have to proactively build them into our daily routines. Second, we should make use of public means of grace.

We should be active in the life of the church. We should worship with the church as often as possible. We should pray with the church. We should hear the preaching of the word from our pastors.

[32 : 17] We should be here to encourage one another and to be encouraged. We should share in the Lord's Supper. We should sacrifice for one another. We should hold one another accountable.

All of these things, public means of grace. A couple of weeks ago, I was speaking with a gentleman at the funeral home and he said to me a line I've heard so many times. I don't need to go to church to be a good Christian.

I said, keep in mind, I've heard this so many times I was prepared for it. I said, let me ask you this. Does one need to read and believe the Bible to be a good Christian?

Christian? Yes, he said. Then you have a problem, I said. Because the Bible is pretty clear. In many times, many ways, it tells us that we must be part of the church.

That's what it means to be a Christian. He just grinned at me and said, well, something tells me you've been reading your Bible more than I've been reading mine. I'm glad he took it that way.

[33 : 22] We absolutely need the church. We cannot grow without our brothers and sisters in Christ. We can't grow without the corporate worship and fellowship the church provides. A third means of growth is careful, constant evaluation of those things and those people that influence us on a daily basis.

You know, reading the Bible each day, for example, is likely to have a positive impact on us. But what about that hour we spend watching TV? What does that do for us? Spending an evening with fellow Christians may be conducive to our growth.

I pray it is. But what happens when we spend a lot of our time with unbelievers? What does that do to us? We're going to have to examine ourselves and be vigilant regarding the various influences in our lives, whatever they may be.

A fourth means of growth is, and this one is absolutely imperative, consistent communion with Christ. Consistent communion with Christ.

While this may fall under the banner of private means of grace or even public means of grace, I think it's worth stressing. Ryle does, and I'm going to let him speak to this point. He says, we must seek to have personal intimacy with the Lord Jesus and to deal with him as a man deals with a loving friend.

[34 : 43] We must realize what it is to turn to him first in every need, to talk to him about every difficulty, to consult him about every step, and to spread before him all our sorrows, to get him to share in all our joys, to do all as in his sight, and to go through every day leaning on and looking to him.

And then he goes on to quote a very apt verse, Paul, who said, to live is Christ's. We're about out of time, so I'm going to leave you with a passage that seems to summarize the mindset we should all have regarding spiritual growth.

When Paul writes to the Philippians, he speaks of attaining the resurrection from the dead. He looks forward to that day. Then he says in Philippians 3, not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on.

I press on to make it my own because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own, but one thing I do, forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

Press on. Press on. Amen to that. I believe we're dismissed.