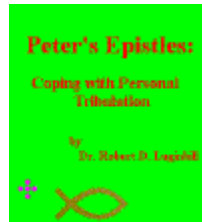


Peter's Epistles #10

An Introduction to Spiritual Growth

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Review: In previous lessons, we have seen how Peter began his first epistle by reminding his readers of the intimate involvement of all three persons of the Trinity in every Christian's life. Though the difficult circumstances which confronted these early Christians were causing them great anxiety, Peter suggests that instead of losing heart, they should view their situation from the "faith perspective".

The Faith Perspective: In the eyes of the world, these poor first century souls were outcasts, they were losers, but "faith vision" reveals an entirely different story from the one the world was wont to tell. In *God's* eyes these believers were all winners, specially selected by God for tremendous blessing in this present life and ineffable ones in the life to come. By believing in Christ, they had become integral parts of the Plan of God, and that personalized plan for each of their individual lives was moving them inexorably forward in ways that mere human means of perception could never detect. Who could see the Father's careful superintendence of each of their personal situations which brought them to the point of faith in Christ at exactly the right time? Who could perceive their transference by the Holy Spirit into the Family of God, or the forgiveness of their sins on the basis of Christ's work in which they believed? Though the world could not see it, they had become sons of God, and heirs of all His promises.

Yet God's plan for them was not completed at the moment they became Christians. They were to remain in this world in order to accomplish a mission and purpose which God had ordained for each of them. While God's specific purpose for each individual believer is as varied as we are, the essential elements of the Plan of God and His basic purpose for every one of us is the same: ***to grow spiritually, and to help others do the same.***

Helping others to grow spiritually is called "ministry". As believers in Jesus Christ, all of us are, in one capacity or another, ministers of the Lord, and no matter how far we have progressed in our quest to obtain spiritual maturity, God provides us with opportunities to help others grow. We all have Christian friends and neighbors, for example, who are in need of encouragement and other assistance from time to time. By giving them emotional and physical support, we give them a hand, so to speak, on the road to our common goal of spiritual maturity. Generally

speaking, as we grow spiritually, our personal ministries become both more specific and more effective.

Besides normal help and support to our church and fellow Christians, we were all given a particular spiritual gift by the Holy Spirit when we accepted Christ as our savior (1Cor.12:11). It may help to think of this as a "spiritual aptitude" for certain kinds of work necessary to help believers grow. Not everyone is cut out to be a missionary, for instance. But God has sprinkled this gift among us, and as believers with this gift grow spiritually and begin to wonder what their special area of ministry should be, they naturally gravitate to where their spiritual talents lie: the mission field in the case of this example. Let me stress here that the proper function of spiritual gifts requires *prior spiritual growth*, and even the correct identification of one's gift takes time and growth to achieve.

Furthermore, some gifts require special training and preparation before they can be put to effective use, but it is very important to remember that the body of Christ (i.e., the Church as a whole) needs *all* its members and *all* their gifts. Paul makes this very point in 1st Corinthians 12:12-31, where he explains to us that Church requires all its parts to function properly just as the human body could not function at all if it were only eyes and ears.

Another important thing to remember about personal ministries is that they cannot be measured by the world's standards. When we get to heaven we shall probably be surprised to learn that some of the more famous (and self-promoting) ministries of our time actually accomplished very little for the Lord. Paul reminds us that there are "varieties of gifts . . . varieties of ministries . . . and] varieties of effects, but the same God who works all things in all persons" (1Cor.12:5-7). This means, among other things, that we do not pick our spiritual gift, nor do we pick the particular form of ministry which God intends for our gift, nor finally are we in control of the results our ministry will have. We are all toiling in the Lord's vineyard, and *He* is the one responsible for giving increase to the fruit of our labors. Our efforts may seem puny and insignificant to the world, but if they are really pleasing to God, they are far more important to Him and to His plan than some high-powered public relations approach in which God plays very little part indeed. As we become more mature Christians, we can expect the effectiveness of our personal ministries to increase. The key, then, to effective personal ministry is personal spiritual growth. So how do we grow?

At the very start of his letter, Peter gives his readers a three-fold explanation of our selection (election) into God's family (see lesson #3 for a full discussion of the phases of the Plan of God: phase one: salvation/faith in Christ; phase two: time/spiritual growth; phase three: eternity/resurrection and reward):

- the Father arranged for our salvation (foreknowledge)
- the Spirit took care of the actual mechanics of salvation (sanctification)
- the Son paid for it (redemption) and is the object of our belief for salvation (faith in Christ)

This three-fold "division of labor" is paralleled by the work of the Trinity on our behalf in phase two of the Plan of God (the believer in time). Each member of the Trinity helps us to accomplish the specific, individual purpose which God has for us: the Father (through His plan) provides for our physical and spiritual support here in the Devil's domain; Jesus Christ is our leader and the focus of our attention here in time, and His work on the cross continues to cleanse us from our sins as we confess them; the Holy Spirit helps us to learn God's truth and put it to use (which is the essence of spiritual growth). Since much of first and second Peter deal with the issue of spiritual growth (and assume a basic understanding of the doctrine), this is an appropriate point to spend some time on the topic. In the weeks ahead, we will examine this "support package" in detail, but here is a brief summary:

The Father: Logistics

- a. *physical*: everything we need to survive in this world on every day which God has given us (e.g. food, shelter, and clothing, and the job necessary to provide them; protection in life-threatening situations).
- b. *spiritual*: everything we need to fulfill our spiritual potential, and accomplish the spiritual growth and ministry which God has purposed for us (e.g. the Bible, evangelization, a church, teachers, gifts, opportunity for learning, for application, for ministry).

The Son: Leadership

- a. *His work* (by becoming our substitute on the cross, Jesus Christ saved us from God's wrath and made our salvation possible; forgiveness of our sins after salvation is also based on the cross and is an essential provision for our continued growth).
- b. *His Person* (The Lord Jesus Christ is the object of our love; His life is our example; He is the "Word" we revere and believe; in short, learning about Him, and learning to live like Him and for Him is what spiritual growth is all about).

The Holy Spirit: Learning

- a. *His ministry of the Word* (it is only through the Spirit's ministry that we can learn, and truly understand God's truth).
- b. *His ministry to our lives* (the Spirit helps us to apply the truth we know to the circumstances of our lives: an essential element of our daily Christian walk, and of our personal ministries).

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