

## 1 ||| **Spiritual Horticulture**

Oliver began coming to the chapel as soon as he arrived at prison. In the years I knew him there, I saw him grow in spiritual maturity "from glory unto glory." But Oliver remembered his life before Jesus Christ entered it. He feared that he might lapse back into the life of alcohol, drugs, and sex that had once gripped him.

Oliver recognized his weaknesses, and he wondered if he could truly be a Christian when he still had such temptations. He feared that the presence of such strong temptations meant that he was not truly saved. Oliver is not the only Christian that struggles with the temptation to sin. Many Christians hold secret inner fears and doubts about their relationship to the Lord because of the tremendous struggle they have with temptations.

### **The Struggle with Sin**

Like many other Christians, Oliver feared that temptation proved God had abandoned him. Since I had seen the power of God in Oliver's life, my first impulse was to laugh at such a silly fear. But he keenly felt the spiritual struggle within him, and he did not know how to fight it. His fear of temptation so consumed his mind that the very struggle to overcome it made it even stronger.

In Galatians, Paul talks about the struggle that Christians face between the flesh and the Spirit. The passions and desires of the flesh are opposed to the desires of the Spirit. Each has its own agenda and goals, and they are contrary to one another. Non-Christians do not have to contend with the same kind of struggle because the struggle grows out of the presence of the Holy Spirit in a person's life. While everyone has struggles of conscience, which are a dimension of the human spirit, only Christians experience the warfare of the flesh and the Spirit of God.

I asked Oliver if his drinking and carousing had bothered him be-

fore he submitted his life to Jesus Christ. "No," he said. In fact, he had enjoyed it a lot! Now that he was a Christian, though, he was miserable.

"Rejoice, then, Oliver," I told him. "Only God can make sin seem miserable. Your struggle proves that God is at work in your life."

Oliver thought that his struggle with sin proved that God was not with him. Many Christians labor under this same dread. Part of the reason probably stems from the fact that many Christians do not understand the idea of sanctification. So much has been said about salvation as eternal life that many Christians do not know what God does with us before heaven. Spiritual growth as a dimension of salvation equal in importance with justification has never found a place in the understanding of many Christians.

When the struggle against sin comes, Christians often feel such shame that they tell no one else about it. They feel alone and isolated, as though they are the only ones who have gone through such a battle. They feel they have failed the Lord and the church. Instead of drawing closer into the fellowship of the church for support and encouragement, they may retreat or drop out of church altogether. Sin carries with it a sense of shame and guilt that some Christians even feel sinful in the temptation. At times like this, the priesthood of Christ has special significance: "For because he himself has suffered and been tempted, he is able to help those who are tempted" (Heb. 2:18).

One of the most alienating factors in our struggle with sin is the fear that others will not understand what we go through. This fear is accompanied by another fear—that we will be rejected because of our weaknesses. Because of His human experience, however, Christ offers us an understanding heart that we cannot find anywhere else, even from ourselves:

For we have not a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need (Heb. 4:15-16).

Christ stands ready to help, but too often we do not seek His help and battle it out alone with our own self-condemnation for company.

I have never been tempted by alcohol or drugs. In all likelihood I

will live out my life, and these will never threaten me. The idea of sticking a needle in my arm for fun is positively crazy to me. I have had a horror of needles since I was a small child and had to go to the county health department for polio shots. Oliver, on the other hand, does not have the load of little fears that keep me from experimenting with new and daring experiences.

Oliver thinks his temptations are the worst of all temptations, primarily because they are his. He does not struggle with temptations like pride, arrogance, envy, gossip, and jealousy. To him these temptations are too small to be given honorable mention. They have no power over him. He does not take them seriously. But they are monsters that threaten to devour me.

Every Christian has his or her own set of temptations to sin. When Paul mentions the works of the flesh in Galatians 5:19-21, he does not give an exhaustive list. His examples, and things like them (v. 21), comprise the work of the flesh. To Paul's brief list in Galatians we could add Colossians 3:5-8 or 2 Timothy 3:2-4. None of these are exhaustive. They simply illustrate the variety of forms which passion and desire can promote. While the average church member may not be tempted by fornication and drunkenness, many churches face the problem of enmity, strife, and party spirit within the body. Works of the flesh, then, are any habits or attitudes that stand in opposition to the Spirit of God.

Oliver's greatest blessing and hope lay in his willingness to confess his spiritual weakness. He recognized the sinfulness of the desires that captivated him. Without a willingness to confess or acknowledge a problem, a solution to the problem will never occur. People who are comfortable with their weaknesses see no need to resist the temptation to gratify every weakness.

I once knew a church member who felt sorry for himself for years. He compounded the problem by convincing himself that the people of the church and community did not like him, wanted to hurt him, talked about him, or deliberately avoided him. The more the man pouted, the more he imagined he had been treated badly. He responded by gossiping about other people and picking fights. He loved to feel sorry for himself! It was a passion which the church member had devoted his life to gratifying. And he would never confess the sinfulness of it, though it had created a wall between him and other believers.

### The Beginning of Growth

Spiritual growth and maturity will only take place when a Christian yearns to follow the impulses of the Holy Spirit. Part of that desire involves a willingness to be taught by the Spirit. Jesus said that when the Spirit came, He would convince the world of sin and righteousness (John 16:8), as well as teach believers all things (John 14:26). Spiritual growth is not inevitable, though it is the will of God for which He has made provision.

#### *Christ: The Goal of Growth*

Over and over the New Testament laments Christians who remain babes after the new birth instead of growing to maturity (Heb. 5:11-14; 1 Cor. 3:1-3). Christlikeness is the goal of spiritual maturity. The aim of the new birth is nothing short of producing offspring for God who conform to the image of Christ (Eph. 4:13-14; Gal. 4:19). Until Christians are truly Christlike, they still require spiritual growth and maturity. God's purpose is that Christians should be "chips off the old block" so that their lineage is unmistakably "like father, like son." As Christ bears the image of the Father, so Christians are to bear the image of the Son.

Instead of focusing on Christ and being like Him, however, many Christians like Oliver try to grow simply by battling sin and temptation. When the Galatians struggled with the questions of spiritual growth, Paul asked them the question: "Having begun with the Spirit, are you now ending with the flesh?" (Gal. 3:3). Spiritual growth is primarily a work of the Holy Spirit; therefore, anyone desiring to be like Christ must depend upon the Holy Spirit to produce the transformation. The Holy Spirit produces the transformation of regeneration that Jesus described to Nicodemus (John 3:6-7), and the Holy Spirit also produces the transformation in holiness that we call spiritual growth.

Spiritual growth, then, is not something a Christian is supposed to do or make happen. On the contrary, a Christian's role in spiritual growth is being a willing vessel in which the Lord works. Paul expresses it this way:

Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the

Lord, are being changed into his likeness from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit (2 Cor. 3:17-18).

Victory over sin does not come in fighting sin but in being close to the Lord, who banishes sin by His glorious presence.

### *The Fruit of the Spirit*

In contrast to the works of the flesh, Paul speaks of transformed Christian life as the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22-23). The Spirit may give many gifts, but it only produces one fruit. Paul says, "The fruit of the Spirit is . . ." and then gives nine qualities to describe that fruit. The fruit of an apple tree may be described as round, sweet, juicy, red, crisp, firm, and tart. Each quality represents a different dimension of the fruit. All dimensions are important, but there is still only one fruit. The Spirit does not produce one kind of fruit in one Christian and another kind of fruit in another Christian. While every soul is unique and each personality respected, the Spirit is producing Christlike beings. The qualities that describe the fruit of the Spirit are the same qualities that describe "the Lord who is the Spirit."

In the Galatians passage, Paul used nine characteristics to describe the fruit of the Spirit. The *Revised Standard Version* renders these characteristics as love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. The *King James Version* renders them as love, joy, peace, long-suffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, and temperance. The different words chosen by the translators give insight into the meaning of the Greek words Paul used to describe the quality of a Spirit-filled life. The terms appear in other places, and these passages indicate how highly the New Testament church regarded these qualities as characteristic of a life in Christ. While the terms are often found by themselves, the frequency with which they are grouped together illustrates their interdependency. They are qualities that supplement and complement one another.

In Romans 5:1-5, Paul joins peace, joy, patience, and love to other qualities that come through the Holy Spirit. In Colossians 3:12-15 Paul mentions the interplay of kindness, meekness, patience, love, and peace with other spiritual qualities. Planted in the great "love chapter" of 1 Corinthians 13, love is irrevocably tied to patience and kindness (v. 4). Contrasting immature passions, 2 Timothy 2:22 links faith,

love, and peace with righteousness. The passion of the world is contrasted with "the divine nature" in 2 Peter 1:3-8 which combines the qualities of faith, self-control, and love with other Christian virtues. Paul considers these qualities of the Spirit as essential to the unity of the body in Ephesians 4:1-3 where he speaks particularly of meekness, patience, love, and peace.

This recurring grouping of the spiritual qualities reinforces the fact that they stand together. They are qualities of the Holy Spirit and, as such, belong together to make a whole. Their combined presence in a person's life is a sign of the Holy Spirit's presence. Their absence from the life of one who professes Jesus Christ as Savior is a sign of resistance to the Holy Spirit of God, and may mean that the person has never truly trusted the Lord!

Though spiritual growth is what God expects and desires for His children, it is not inevitable. Fruit is the sign of spiritual maturity. Just as a young fruit tree will not bear fruit for a number of years, a young Christian may require some time to begin showing the effect of the transforming presence of the Holy Spirit of Christ. But that effect must begin to show, or something is dreadfully wrong! Bearing fruit is not an option chosen only by a few religious fanatics. The failure of fruit comes from a failure in one's relationship with Christ.

Jesus told a parable about a fig tree that produced no fruit:

"A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came seeking fruit on it and found none. And he said to the vinedresser, 'Lo, these three years I have come seeking fruit on this fig tree, and I find none. Cut it down; why should it use up the ground?' And he answered him, 'Let it alone, sir, this year also, till I dig about it and put on manure. And if it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down' "

(Luke 13:6-9).

When I was a boy, we had a huge fig tree beside our back porch. Its trunk was big and strong. Its foliage provided a dense canopy that shaded the porch. Best of all, its branches were covered with figs. In time, however, the branches of taller trees spread over it and cut off the light from the sun. The foliage became less dense with each passing year. The limbs became weak and broke off. Within a few years, the tree stopped bearing fruit. It became a stunted shrub, and then it died. Just like our old fig tree, Christians derive their strength and life-

giving power to produce fruit from an external Source. Without the constant giving of that Source, the plant and the Christian cannot bear fruit.

Christians cannot produce a Christlike life out of their own resources any more than a fig tree can produce figs without fertile soil. The Holy Spirit is the power in a Christian's life that produces the fruit of godliness. Without that source of energy and life, Christians struggle in frustration to do what they cannot do. Yet, no Christian lacks for any of the strength and power needed to grow spiritually because the Holy Spirit has come to every believer. Then why do some grow, producing the fruit of a Christian life while others seem to atrophy?

### The Christian's Role

While the work of sanctification is the work of the Holy Spirit, Christians are not totally passive objects in the process. We have a part to play in sanctification just as we do in regeneration. God does not treat His children like objects, rather He seeks their willing cooperation. These matters weighed greatly on the mind of Christ during His last time together with His closest disciples. After supper He said to them:

"I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. Every branch of mine that bears no fruit, he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit. You are already clean by the word which I have spoken to you. Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in me, and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. If a man does not abide in me, he is cast forth as a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire and burned. If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you will, and it shall be done for you. By this my Father is glorified that you bear much fruit, and so prove to be my disciples. As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full" (John 15:1-11).

In this statement on the nature of Christian growth and maturity, Jesus made two dramatic points. First, Christians have no life of their own apart from Christ. This abiding in Christ involves the positive dimension of feeding and nurture. Second, bearing fruit involves a negative dimension of pruning. Within the context of these two ingredients Christian growth takes place. The absence of either of these will make growth impossible.

I love to eat fresh garden fruits and vegetables in the summertime. Allowed to ripen in the sun, they have an indescribable texture and flavor. They are so unlike the pitiful things we buy in the grocery store in January. While the store may call that spongy, hard, tasteless thing a tomato, it does not have the quality it would have had if it had remained on the vine to ripen in the sun. When the Spirit first begins to produce fruit in a Christian, it does not appear in its perfected form. Instead, spiritual growth comes through a ripening process. Too often, Christians remain content with the first appearance of spiritual fruit in their lives. Apart from close contact with Christ, the process stops like the tomatoes picked before they are ripe. By abiding in Christ, a Christian's life matures like ripening fruit.