

AUGUST 2005—*Growing?*

Are you growing spiritually? If your answer is “yes,” on what basis do you draw that conclusion?

Perhaps most of us would say that our conclusion is based on the fact that we are sinning less than we once did, or that we are regularly attending church, or reading the Bible, or praying, or giving to the church, or doing good deeds, or becoming a better person—or all of the above. But are these things reliable barometers of our spiritual growth?

It is certainly right to say that the absence of such behaviors would be fair cause to question someone’s spiritual development. But these behaviors, while clearly positive, offer no guarantee that we are actually growing in grace. Surprised? We need only remember the Pharisees of old who lived scrupulously moral lives and maintained strict spiritual disciplines. Their lives were exemplary—at least externally.

How then are we to judge whether we are really growing in God’s grace? C.S. Lewis provides some helpful insights in his book *Mere Christianity*.

Remember that, as I said, the right direction leads not only to peace but to knowledge. When a man is getting better he understands more and more clearly the evil that is still left in him. When a man is getting worse he understands his own badness less and less. A moderately bad man knows he is not very good: a thoroughly bad man thinks he is all right. This is common sense, really. You understand sleep when you are awake, not while you are sleeping. You can see mistakes in arithmetic when your mind is working properly: while you are making them you cannot see them. You can understand the nature of drunkenness when you are sober, not when you are drunk. Good people know about both good and evil: bad people do not know about either.¹

One of the surest signs of genuine growth in grace is increasing Christlikeness along with an increasing awareness of the depths of our own remaining sin. When Jesus said, “blessed are those who mourn” (Mt. 5.4), he was probably talking about those who mourn for the sins which continue to plague their lives. Does this mean that we are to be perpetually guilt-ridden and miserable? Not at all, for Jesus goes on to say that they who mourn “will be comforted.” And this comfort comes as we see the depth of our remaining sins in light of the far greater depth of God’s pardoning love. This brings hope and leads us to repentance, and its sweet fruit of joy in our souls.

*If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.
If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins
and purify us from all unrighteousness.*

I JOHN 1:8-9 NIV

¹ C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Touchstone, a division of Simon & Schuster, 1996), pp. 88.