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SERMON CCCC V.

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THE MAGNITUDE OF THE MINISTERIAL WORK.

"I am doing a great work, so that I cannot come down."—NEH. vi. 3.

NEHEMIAH had undertaken to rebuild Jerusalem. He found its walls broken down, and its gates consumed with fire. The sight deeply affected his heart. "He sat down and wept and mourned certain days, and fasted and prayed before the God of heaven." But tears and fasting did not satisfy him. He aroused himself and went to work to repair the ruin of his beloved city. In this undertaking he encountered formidable opposition. The enemy derided, scorned, threatened. Yet he was not to be turned aside. He prosecuted the enterprise till it was nearly completed. Seeing that direct opposition availed nothing his opposers changed their mode of attack. They proposed to meet him, for friendly consultation, on the plain of Ono. But he understood the stratagem. "They think to do me mischief," said he. "I shall not meet them. They are enemies in disguise." Accordingly, he dispatched messengers to say in his name, "I am doing a great work, so that I cannot come down." Thus, their iniquitous design was defeated.

There is a spiritual, as there was a literal Jerusalem to be built. Its ruins are to be raised up, its wastes repaired. The ministers of Christ are the *Nehemiahs* in this work. They have walked about Zion, marked her desolation, and mourned and fasted and prayed over it. They love her gates and her towers—even her ruins are precious in their eyes. Never can they forget her welfare or her woe. While she remains a desolation, like the captive Jews by the stream of Babylon, they are despondent and sad. Still they live upon the promise that she shall one day rise and

The nature of our calling, fathers and brethren, is apparent. It is high, arduous, hopeful. We are pressed with difficulties on one hand, sustained by hopes on the other, and cheered on by the recompense of reward. We are troubled on every side, yet not distressed—perplexed, but not in despair, persecuted but not forsaken, cast down but not destroyed. Let us stand continually in our watch-tower, in the day-time, and in our ward whole nights, with a vigilant eye upon the enemy, the gospel trumpet in our hand, ready at the first signal of danger, to set it to our mouth, and blow an alarm in God's holy mountain. Our position, is a responsible and trying one. But we are not to stand here long—we shall soon be summoned away. A few more days of painful watchings and fastings, and we stand at Christ's judgment seat, our toils and conflicts over, and the results of our ministry to be weighed and adjudged for eternity. O, what shall be the decision of that eventful day concerning us? Having been stedfast to the end, shall it be said to us, "well done, good and faithful servants—enter into the joy of your Lord?" Having turned many to righteousness shall we shine as the brightness of the firmament and as the stars for ever and ever. God grant, that this may be our favoured lot. Then shall we forget in the glory which shall be revealed in us, the fiery trials through which we are now passing. "Then shall he that now goeth forth and weepeth, bearing precious seed, come again with rejoicing bringing his sheaves with him."

SERMON CCCCVI.

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GROWTH IN KNOWLEDGE AND GRACE.

"Grow in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ."—
2 PETER iii c. 18 v.

KNOWLEDGE and grace are progressive. Like nature, society and intellect, they advance towards ideal perfection found only in God. Nature originated in the incoherent materials of wild chaos, without form and void; and through successive periods undefined advanced to its present state. Society had its infancy and youth, and is now advancing to a state of manhood more perfect. And intellect, though more rapid in its progress, and certain in its attainments, has not reached human perfectibility. All these are

in a state of progressive improvement. So will knowledge and grace continue to advance while we know only in part, and cease to be perfect as our Father in heaven.

The all-wise Creator has not raised his rational creatures to an equal elevation with himself, and placed them on the lofty summit of perfection. Nor may they reach this in their onward progress of knowledge and grace. Though they should become perfect in holiness, and know as they are known; yet being finite, they cannot reach perfection infinite. There will ever remain a state of perfection unattained by men. Endless progression, then, may be, and doubtless is the law of their being. Their mental powers and moral susceptibilities will continue to expand with growing knowledge and grace.

Such is the principle recognized and inculcated in the text.—“Grow in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ.” This injunction is general in its nature, and unlimited in duration. All, who acknowledge Christ to be their Lord and Saviour are to grow in grace and knowledge without any assigned limitation perpetually. Here is a divine recognition of the principle of progressive improvement—ceaseless progression towards ideal perfection. This should wake up the slumbering energies of the soul, and bring into requisition all its powers; as we contemplate the *means, nature and evidence of growth in knowledge and grace.*

I. The *means* of growth in knowledge and grace. Like those employed in the attainment of other objects, these are various and from different sources. And though they range a wider field than the common means of grace; it is one in which the more enlightened find “green pastures and still waters” that facilitate their progress.

Among these means are those, that give an insight to the physical world—its formation, laws and component parts—embracing natural history, philosophy and the sciences. Natural history furnishes an out-line of the earth, as it came from the forming hand of the Almighty, who said, “Let there be light and there was light—who commanded and it stood fast;” and of its changes and present appearance, as affected by his curse after the fall of man, and the warning elements in volcanoes, earthquakes, tornadoes and storms. It also furnishes a history of animated nature in its various ranks of being, and different stages of improvement. And while ranging over this field of nature, and studying its history, the mind is expanded and knowledge increased.

Natural philosophy develops the laws of nature, the course of changes in the material world; and the properties of matter, solid bodies, air and light. It also makes us familiar with the laws of motion, the mechanical powers, the angle of vision, the reflection and refraction of rays of light, and the colors of the rainbow. And thus it unfolds the mysteries of nature; till nature's open

volume is read in every object around, and God is discovered to be the Sovereign of all. And while we contemplate the scene the soul rises to its just dimensions and in silent wonder, adores the God of nature.

The natural sciences analyze material substances and classify animate nature, till the several parts of each are made familiar. Chemistry reduces bodies to their original elements, making known their component parts, and showing their affinities. Geology informs us how these elementary substances combine in organized bodies to construct this globe for a stage of action. Minerology describes the peculiar properties and appropriate uses of the different minerals designed for the benefit of earth's inhabitants. Zoology classifies, and teaches the various habits of animals, which bring the irrational under the controlling influence of him, whom God placed over the rest. Ornithology treats of the various species of birds and their peculiarities, as they warble the praises of their Creator. While Astronomy traces the heavenly bodies in their various, yet harmonious courses of concentric circles first around the sun of their own systems; then the centre of the more extended astral system; and finally the common centre of a universe of worlds and systems. Thus science throws open the avenue of nature and grants the mind free access to all her movements. And as it wanders over this vast field of nature, the soul rises to her ethereal destiny, and feels an affinity to the master spirit of the created universe. Nor will she, in the rapture of feeling, and hallowed aspiring, fail to acknowledge him, "God over all." And thus her progress in knowledge and grace is facilitated by physical means that combine all nature in one perfect whole, through which she looks up to nature's God.

Unlike these, *intellectual* means, also promote her growth in knowledge and grace. Disclaiming all acquaintance with the essence of mind and confining ourselves to its operations merely, intellectual Philosophy becomes a faithful source of improvement. The operations of mind, no less than the properties of matter are objects of rational investigation. And though the science of Metaphysics has been much abused and is generally denounced as a relic of the schoolmen; yet kept within its own appropriate sphere and based on the principles of induction, it is a delightful and important study. Through this medium—mental science—we discover the true sources of knowledge. Nor may they be understood without it—without an acquaintance with metaphysics—that, which carries us beyond the physical world, material objects, and makes us familiar with mind, and mental operations. This only prepares us to understand that we perceive objects through the senses; reflect on what we are conscious of—and believe the testimony of others—from which we discover that the only true sources of knowledge are the senses, consciousness, and testimony. A discovery that necessarily develops the intellectual powers of

perception, memory; abstraction, imagination, reason and judgment. Powers capable of improvement, and indefinite expansion—that reach away beyond surrounding objects, material substances, and nature's scenery to the loftier contemplation of immaterial and spiritual objects that are eternal. And amidst these the mind feels its superiority to perishable beings and breathes out a holy aspiration after immortality. Nor will it come down from its aspirations, and be satisfied with the beggarly elements of the world. It must be on the wing, amidst ethereal spirits, bearing away to the throne of God. And as it catches a glimpse, in its upward flight, of his transcendent worth, it is in rapture, and urges forward with renewed energy to reach eternal glory. Nor will it tire in its course, or cease its progress in knowledge and grace, while intellect lasts and immortality endures.

Again, *moral* means, differing from physical and intellectual, are not less efficient in their influence on our growth in knowledge and grace. Bearing upon the relations and responsibilities, of accountable beings, they necessarily bring into requisition the moral energies of the soul. And these being susceptible of improvement, we have recourse to the science of moral philosophy, that treats of the moral feelings, will, conscience, and relations of men. And here learning their nature, and the province of each, our responsibilities are seen and acknowledged. Our desires and affections, with a strong attachment to ourselves, assume a moral character, that affords delight or occasions sorrow. Our will also being free in the choice of objects of affection, excite anxiety and needs control. And our conscience, sitting in judgment on these objects, and the desire to obtain them, becomes the moral regulator of the whole machinery of moral action: and, duly enlightened, never fails to decide correctly on the merits of every object of regard, and the course pursued to obtain it—which gives its decisions an important influence in every moral movement. And being acquainted with our moral relations to God and one another, the obligations to both are most plain and binding. And these make us feel the responsibility of acknowledging them in deeds of obedience and acts of good-will. Such an investigation of our moral being, the laws of moral agency, and moral accountability, is a rich source of improvement. It carries us over the whole range of moral existence in ourselves, superior intelligences, and God—unfolds the laws of each and those that bind the whole together in one harmonious moral government. Nor is there ought in the range of physical or intellectual attainments of equal moment. It is our moral relations, responsibilities and actions, that constitute moral character, on which are suspended the destinies of eternity. And each advance in moral science promotes our growth in knowledge and grace, that qualifies us for the more ennobling objects and employments of glorified beings—to range over the whole extent of God's moral kingdom, and associate with angels and the Eternal.

Further, *religious* means, differing from all these, serve to advance our growth in knowledge and grace. They develop the strength of attachment to truth and things divine—particularly Christ and his doctrines. It is the heart or affections with which religion has to do. Regardless of nature and her works, the mere developments of intellect, and the moral culture of the soul, religion seats itself in the hearts of men. It is holy affections that constitute pure and undefiled religion. And it is this, that attaches us to truth and heavenly objects. And with this attachment we grow in knowledge and grace—search the scriptures to learn the reality and true application of their doctrines. And as we become better acquainted with the being and character of God, our own guilt and unworthiness, the compassionate love and atoning sacrifice of Christ, the nature and necessity of being born of the Spirit, the nature of justification through faith, the perseverance of saints in holy obedience, and the certainty of death, judgment and eternity, our affections are rendered more holy, and our attachment to the truth grows stronger. And thus our knowledge and grace are advanced through religious means. Nor can the higher qualities or purer susceptibilities of the soul be developed without them. However extended our knowledge, we have not attained the utmost of which we are capable, while destitute of holy affections, without religion. It is the love of truth, an attachment to Christ, the religion of the heart, that gives moral dignity to the character, and real worth to men. And without this, we may not be purified, sanctified and glorified. We must be holy, possess hallowed affections, in order to develop all our capabilities, dwell with God, and rise from glory to glory immortal.

II. The *nature* of growth in knowledge and grace. This differs from growth in grace merely; and still more from growth in knowledge without grace—it is the combination of both. Men may grow in grace and remain comparatively ignorant. And they may grow in knowledge and be entirely graceless. Hume and Voltaire possessed much knowledge—they were learned and talented men; but claimed no grace for themselves, and probably possessed none. Bunyan and Howard were pious and benevolent, but made no pretensions to great knowledge and learning, and possessed but comparatively little. While Luther and Calvin were both learned and pious. They grew in knowledge and grace, exhibited the nature of true piety, and exerted the influence of great knowledge.

And all ought thus to advance in both; since the command is positive—“grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord.” As this injunction is unqualified, so their growth should be real. But how?—how are they to advance in knowledge and grace? In what does this growth consist? Not in the miraculous interposition of Heaven, nor the addition of new powers, but in the right use of means by those already possessed. The period of miracles

has past—God no longer interposes his power to supercede the laws of nature and those of his moral kingdom to make men great and good—they do not thus grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord. Nor does their advance in these consist in the addition of any new powers of body or mind. The physical and mental energies, moral and religious susceptibilities of men, may be invigorated by growth in knowledge and grace; while it adds none to their numbers, no new powers or faculties. This growth consists rather in the right use of the means designed for this purpose by those powers already possessed. Men are naturally endowed with all the powers essential to progressive improvement. And when employed in the use of appropriate means—found in the works of nature and the volume of divine truth—they grow in knowledge and grace; as their various powers are being harmoniously unfolded by opening scenes and passing events, that continue to expand their views, elevate their aims, sanctify their hearts, and fill their whole souls with delight.

Though the employment of these means fosters, in those destitute of grace, the pride of intellect, and makes them vain-glorious, imagining themselves greater than the rest; yet it renders the pious, who grow in knowledge and grace, more wise, humble, teachable and obedient. The wisdom, that cometh down from above, is greater than the wisdom of this world, and makes men *wise* unto salvation. They may be great and wise in their own estimation, and that of others, even the world; and still be ignorant of themselves, of their capabilities and their destinies. So it was with the ancient philosophers of Greece and Rome; and so it has been, and still is, with the modern infidels of France and Germany. They have claimed, and the world has given them credit for much wisdom; yet they have never understood their own characters and what awaits them in eternity. But when men are taught of the spirit, they become wise indeed. They know more of themselves than the seven wise men of ancient renown, and the whole host of modern free-thinkers. They discover their own littleness, and dependence; while the character of God is exalted, and his claims acknowledged. As they wander over the creation of God, and survey his wondrous works, they are astonished and filled with awe at his greatness—they see him to be “all in all,” the “Lord of heaven and earth.” And they willingly and reverently bow to him, as their Lord and God; while they discover their own insignificance in the scale of being, and entire, absolute dependence on him. They can neither think nor act without his aid. They cannot make one hair white or black—neither can they make a spire of grass grow; much less raise their puny hand, and stop the planet, sun or system in its course; or stay “old ocean’s” waves, hold the whirlwind in their fist, and put to silence the rolling thunder. They are as nothing before God. And thus growth in knowledge and grace lessen men

in their own estimation and exalt the Lord, Jehovah—which alone makes them wise unto salvation.

They also become more *humble*. Every attainment in knowledge and grace serves to develop their own worthlessness in comparison with the superior excellence of their Creator. The deeper they enter into the hidden recesses of their own bosoms, the more dark the deformity of their moral character appears. They see little more than sin and pollution—a cage of unclean things. And but for the abounding grace of God, they might exclaim,

"Myself is hell : whichever way I turn
Is hell. And in this hell I see
A deeper hell beneath !"

But in God they behold all pure and holy—every display of his character is an exhibition of divine excellence. And the contrast between him and themselves renders them most humble. They feel their own inferiority, and delight to honor the Almighty. He is the object of their highest regard—"the chiefest among ten thousand, the one altogether lovely"—nor will they bring their own interest into competition with his honor and glory. They see him to be worthy of their love, praise and adoration; while they feel themselves unworthy of the least of his favours.

Again, this makes them more *teachable*. As men advance in knowledge, they are the more willing to be taught—and as grace abounds they seek the teaching of the spirit. Growing in knowledge and grace prepares them to be taught of God—to learn of the meek and humble Jesus. Though they read nature in every waving spire, blushing flower, towering oak and revolving sphere, they love to sit at his feet, and receive instructions from his word. It is the great foundation of truth and righteousness—the source of light, life and immortality. And with a teachable disposition, they drink deep of the well of salvation—the waters of life. And thus their growth in knowledge and grace renders them more susceptible of divine truth—more docile, willing to be taught.

And further, under the influence of this, they become more *obedient*. As they advance in knowledge and grace, they discover that obedience is the true source of happiness. It is the rational and full employment of all their powers—developes all their capabilities—and affords all the enjoyment of which they are susceptible. Discovering this—that obedience brings out all their resources, and combines the whole in the utmost enjoyment, no authority is necessary to enforce it, they delight to obey, they choose rather to serve the Lord than enjoy sin for a season. Nor will they cease to obey, while they continue to grow in knowledge and grace. And when they shall know, as they are known, and are made perfect in holiness, their obedience shall be complete and their happiness all they are capable of enjoying—their souls shall be full, filled to the utmost with bliss ineffable.

III. The *evidence* of growth in knowledge and grace. This may not always be clear ; but should be correctly understood. Its direct application to personal attainments clothe it with importance, that claims the regard of those anticipating the highest improvement. Nor should they be destitute of evidence, that will be found in a growing sense of wickedness, a stronger attachment to truth and righteousness, and a habitual desire for higher attainments in holiness.

Such traits of character are never seen in those of intellectual attainments merely. Whatever be their mental acquirements, these do not make them feel more unworthy. Neither do they promote their attachment to divine truth : nor create in them a desire for holiness. These are not the results of human attainments, mere intellectual knowledge. But they are sure marks of growth in knowledge and grace—evidence which the righteous have within themselves. As the light of truth, and the spirit of all grace increase in their souls, they become more and more sensible of their moral deformity. Divine grace, in the heart, is like light in a dark place, it makes surrounding darkness more visible. And as the righteous advance in knowledge and grace, they feel more sensibly their guilt, discover more clearly their unworthiness. *An increasing sense of wickedness, thus, paradoxical as it may seem—is good evidence of growth in grace.* David had a growing sense of his wickedness. Paul thought himself the chief of sinners, and christians generally become more and more sensible of their unworthiness. Nor should any be satisfied without this sure mark of growing piety.

Another evidence, no less essential will be found in a *stronger attachment to truth and righteousness.* As knowledge increases and grace abounds, the truths of God and the requisitions of his word are better understood, and afford delight that strengthen the attachment of the truly pious. They here discover the true source, the only ground of real happiness, and hold to truth with a firmer grasp ; as they grow in grace and the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ. Nor will this attachment cease to grow stronger, while their views of truth and righteousness are being extended. As they see more clearly their adaptation to the wants of all, and feel more happy in the enjoyment they afford, their love for them will increase—every new development of divine truth under the government of God, and of Christ's righteousness in the salvation of men, will add fresh strength to affections corresponding with their knowledge and grace, and as these advance, so their attachment to truth and righteousness will strengthen ; and this attachment will be sure evidence of growth in piety. An evidence that all should possess.

Still another evidence of growth in knowledge and grace will be found in a *habitual desire for higher attainments in holiness.* Destitute of piety, men have no desire to be holy ; but possessed of

this, they are never satisfied with present attainments. They would be freed from sin and made perfect in holiness ; they would be wholly sanctified. This is the desire of their hearts, it is that to which they habitually aspire ; nor will they rest, till they reach perfection. They will go on to know the Lord—grow in knowledge and grace ; and each advance will only make them desirous of higher attainments : as they know more of God, they will feel more anxious to be like him, a feeling that will become habitual, and urge them forward in their progress towards perfection. And even when they shall have become perfect in heaven, they will aspire to higher attainments in holiness. Nor will they cease to become more holy, as God continues to make new displays of his character, and they advance in knowledge and grace. And thus they will develope in full glory, the love of their being, endless progression—progressive holiness. In conclusion, I remark,

1. Improvement in knowledge and grace cannot be too highly appreciated. This will seem almost a self-evident proposition to those satisfied with the views of this discourse. If such be our capabilities, and the means of improvement are so various and boundless, then no estimation of its importance can be too great. We are endowed with powers susceptible of indefinite improvement, endless progression in knowledge and holiness ; and the necessary means are found on either side, around, above, beneath, and within us. There is nothing that we perceive through the senses, on which we reflect in our own bosoms, or of which others bear testimony, that may not be employed in our improvement. And this is plainly enjoined of God and highly beneficial to ourselves.

Who then can place too high an estimate on our improvement, growth in knowledge and grace ? Is there aught besides of equal value ? Is any other object within the range of our influence, or under our control, to be compared with the improvement of the soul ? What are we profited if we gain the whole world and lose our souls ?

2. Each advancing attainment, in knowledge and holiness, increases our capacity for happiness. Though necessarily limited, our capacities for enjoyment are susceptible of indefinite improvement. And though various are the sources of enjoyment, yet happiness is our grand object and aim. We would be happy—reluctant as we are to pursue the path of righteousness and use the appointed means of grace—we still design and expect to obtain happiness. Nor do we desire less that our happiness should be great. Though limited, we delight in the anticipation of its increasing. And though the employment of means to accomplish an object so desirable be unwelcome, yet we rejoice in the prospect of its being attained. It is the great desire of our hearts to be increasingly happy.

3. Our wants and abilities correspond exactly with the requisitions and blessings of Heaven. God requires only what we are

able to perform, and he furnishes the means just suited to our wants. We are required to grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord; and all nature, with the intellectual and moral worlds, and the kingdom of grace, are thrown open to our assistance. We need nothing more to perform what is enjoined, and are capable of bringing all these to aid in the work. We may wander over the animal, the vegetable and mineral kingdoms of nature, through the active and passive powers of intellect, amidst the acts of volition, decisions of conscience and relations of God and men, and into the secret chambers of the heart, amidst the affections and more delicate susceptibilities of the soul, with the word of God in our hands and the Holy Spirit in our bosoms, and grow in knowledge and grace through all our course. Nor is there aught unwelcome or difficult in this—we have all the requisite powers to perform it with delight. And in doing this, we expand the soul, advance in happiness, and secure the promised blessings of life eternal.

Happy result of a wise adaptation of means to the end! What a correspondence of wants and abilities to requisitions and blessings! It is worthy of infinite wisdom; and will afford delight to blessed intelligences through interminable ages. Angels may well desire to look into the manifold wisdom of God, and with admiring wonder chaunt his praises. While redeemed spirits, still growing in knowledge and grace, and rising higher towards perfection infinite, shall add a symphony to the song of heaven, before unknown; and as the echo is heard through the mansions of that blessed abode, in the sweet accents of love and loud hallelujahs to the Lamb. All heaven shall join in the full chorus of "Blessing, honor and glory" to God, who adapted the means to their salvation and crowned them with a blessed immortality.

4. The perfect holiness of heaven will be a source of delight ineffable. There the affections, moral powers, intellect and every body will be holy. Mortality will have put on immortality, and nothing unholy will enter there.

There every obstacle to progressive improvement will be removed, and our attainments in knowledge and holiness be more rapid. With associates from every part, and each period of this world, its history will soon be known. With those from other worlds, (if inhabitants they have,) we become acquainted with their peculiarities, and the mode of their being saved and raised to heaven; till the history of all worlds be understood, and we become as citizens of the universe. And associated with the different orders of angels, we learn the character of each, till the office and employment of the whole are familiar; and then witnessing the unfolding events of God's moral government, over this vast and numberless throng of rational intelligence, and the new displays of his character continually transpiring, yet incomprehensible, our souls, ever expanding, rapt in wonder and admiration, will swell with delight ineffable.