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ARE YOU GROWING IN GRACE?

We are all familiar with the very last statement that the Apostle Peter wrote to the Church. The last instruction that Peter had for God's people at the end of his second letter was:

But **grow in grace**, **and** [**in**] **the knowledge** of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him [be] glory both now and for ever. Amen. (2 Peter 3:18)

There are two specific instructions in this verse:

1) We are to "grow in grace".

2) We are to "grow in the knowledge of Jesus Christ".

The Apostle Peter clearly had something specific in mind when he wrote down these instructions. So what are the two things that Peter actually wants us to do?

It should be clear that Peter's statement does not refer to something that God would do to us or for us or give to us. No, Peter was speaking about **something that we ourselves are to do**.

The Greek verb translated as "grow" (i.e. "auxanete") means: become greater, cause an increase. This verb "auxanete" is in the imperative mood, expressing a command. Peter's instruction is that **we ourselves must "cause that increase**". It is not a reference to something that God will do for us. We ourselves are commanded to grow in these two things.

Implied is that we will have to work in order to grow; we will have to put out real committed serious effort to achieve such increases. But that is something that very many people have never really done for very long, **put out sustained real personal effort** to increase their knowledge and their understanding of the will of God, let alone putting out sustained effort to grow in grace.

We may as well call a spade a spade.

Peter was not making some erudite esoteric statement here, which would require profound theological understanding. This is a straightforward and uncomplicated command for God's people. So what did Peter urge us to do?

GROW IN KNOWLEDGE

The easier one of these two instructions to understand is to "grow in knowledge". We grow in knowledge by learning more information, by gathering more facts, and by coming to understand the teachings of the Bible more fully. This instruction requires us to study the Bible, and it requires commitment.

This instruction is in fact the Apostle Peter's equivalent of Paul's instruction to Timothy in 2 Timothy 2:15.

Study to show yourself approved unto God, a workman that needs not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth. (2 Timothy 2:15)

Paul's point in 2 Timothy 2:15 is that if we members of God's Church don't put out the effort to seriously study the Bible, then we will end up being "ashamed" for our lack of discernment of the principles of Christian living. **Without serious study nobody acquires the ability to "rightly divide the word of truth"**, though that has never stopped people who don't do serious study from strongly believing that they are indeed quite capable of "rightly dividing the word of truth". It is unlikely that Paul would have shared their view had Paul met such people.

That is also what Peter had in mind when he instructed us to "grow in the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ", that **as a result of serious Bible study** we would learn to correctly apply the principles of Christian living to our daily circumstances. And without growth in knowledge and in understanding we will end up being ashamed at some point, if not before then, then at the very latest at Jesus Christ's second coming. This is a matter of cause and effect.

So do we in fact have greater knowledge and better understanding after 30 or more years in God's Church than we had after three or four or five years in the Church? Do we after 20, 30 or 40 years in God's Church still need to listen to what are essentially the same sermons and sermonettes and the same explanations which we heard when we first came into the Church? Hearing things we have already heard for 20 or 30 or 40 years obviously does not challenge us intellectually, which also means that it will not contribute to any growth in our minds. Hearing things we have repeatedly heard before does not help us to grow in knowledge. That is self-evident.

If we do need to hear sermons and explanations that are content-wise essentially identical to messages we heard and read decades ago, then we haven't really grown in the knowledge of Jesus Christ, have we? Let's face it! Old sermons and old articles are old sermons and old articles; and those people who have grown in knowledge should not really need to hear and read them again, and again, and again.

It is not that there is necessarily anything wrong with the old sermons. But they are "the milk" (see Hebrews 5:12) that we needed in our early years in God's Church. However, those old messages are not "the strong meat" that we need once we have mastered "the milk". Understand that what is "strong meat" for us today will for us be a part of "the milk" ten and more years from now. But for newcomers in God's Church ten years from now those same things may still be "strong meat" for a while. There must always be progress. That is what Peter was addressing. **Growth always represents progress.**

Mr. Armstrong has been dead for 30 years. Yet there are numerous people who still want to listen to old sermons and old broadcasts from Mr. Armstrong, and read his old booklets and articles, things they have listened to and read repeatedly in the past, somewhat like people who want to watch old movies over and over. Or it may be old sermons from other ministers who have died that they continue to listen to on a fairly regular basis. What this says is that those people are content with the knowledge that was available 20, 30 and more years ago. They don't believe that they need to grow in knowledge.

Instead of seeking to grow in knowledge and in understanding, such people seek security in **resisting any growth in understanding**, by zealously sticking with knowledge that was available at a certain window in time in the past.

Here is why growing in knowledge is so important.

A LITTLE KNOWLEDGE IS A DANGEROUS THING

We have all heard this saying before. In science theories change as more knowledge becomes available. In medicine treatments for health problems change as knowledge increases. Opinions about nutrition change as people learn more about the effects different diets have on the human body. In the study of astronomy theories about the universe have changed as scientists have learned more about matter and the universe. For athletes the training methods have changed as the understanding about the effects of training has grown.

The point is that in every area of endeavor **more knowledge and more understanding leads to changes** being made to what was previously accepted as proper and correct. In many cases additional knowledge exposes that previous beliefs and practices were seriously flawed, and in some cases even dangerous and detrimental to health and well-being.

This exposes the problem that when we only have access to "a little knowledge" **it is very easy to draw wrong conclusions** and to reach wrong decisions. That is why a little knowledge is dangerous, because when acted on, that little knowledge can at times have devastating consequences.

The principle that a little knowledge is dangerous is also true in the area of religion!

All of the world's religions only have "a little knowledge". That is because without access to God's spirit "no man knows the things of God" (see 1 Corinthians 2:11). And without an understanding of the things of God it is inevitable that their knowledge is only "little" at best.

But this is not restricted to people in the world's religions. This is also true for people in God's Church, that a little knowledge can very easily be a dangerous thing. It can be dangerous because incomplete knowledge can be misused and it can cause us to draw wrong conclusions.

A clear biblical example of a little knowledge being a dangerous thing is recorded in Acts, and involved the sons of a Jewish High Priest. Notice the account of that incident:

Then certain of the vagabond Jews, exorcists, took upon them to call over them which had evil spirits the name of the Lord Jesus, saying, **We adjure you by Jesus whom Paul preaches**. (Acts 19:13)

And there were seven sons of [one] Sceva, a Jew, [and] chief of the priests, which did so. (Acts 19:14)

And the evil spirit answered and said, **Jesus I know**, and **Paul I know**; **but who are you**? (Acts 19:15)

And the man in whom the evil spirit was leaped on them, and overcame them, and prevailed against them, so that **they fled** out of that house naked and wounded. (Acts 19:16)

These sons of Sceva had a very little knowledge. They only knew that Paul used the name of Jesus Christ when casting out demons. Since it worked for Paul, therefore they figured that it should also work for them. Were they ever wrong!

The main problem in this matter is that when we only have a little knowledge of something, we ourselves almost never realize just how little our knowledge in that "something" really is. Typically, we assume that we have all the knowledge that is needed to make correct decisions. And we do not perceive how limited our knowledge still happens to be.

This is one of the main reasons why we really do need to study "to show ourselves approved unto God". We have to recognize that "**now we see through a glass darkly**" and that now we **only know** "**in part**" (1 Corinthians 13:12). In other words, now at this time we only have a little knowledge, which means we run the risk of sometimes misunderstanding and misapplying that limited knowledge.

It is through **serious and continued study** that we can increase our level of knowledge and understanding. Serious study is essential to enable us to rightly divide the word of truth, and without serious study people easily draw wrong conclusions from the little knowledge available to them.

RELIANCE ON TRADITIONS

Many people rely on traditions, and quite often they will spontaneously argue against facts which are new to them and which facts they don't like.

We should understand the following point:

Traditions are one of the most powerful barriers to any growth in knowledge and in understanding!

One of the main reasons people develop traditions is to guard against changes being introduced as a result of a new and better understanding. Traditions eliminate the need for logic and for sound valid reasons.

And Satan is a master at establishing traditions!

In a general sense all people around the world and in every age have been constrained to a greater or lesser degree by traditions. Traditions provide a ceiling for what we may do and how to deal with things, by resisting new understanding that would demand changes. Traditions are a very harsh slave master, an inflexible foe disguised as a friend.

All of us can see that this is true for people in the world, be that primitive societies in bygone ages who were enslaved by their own traditions, or be that the profusion of conflicting religious traditions in the world today. People are and always have been enslaved by their own traditions. That is something the Apostle Peter also addressed.

Forasmuch as you know that you were not redeemed with corruptible things, [as] silver and gold, from your **vain conversation** [received] **by tradition** from your fathers; (1 Peter 1:18)

The expression "vain conversation" really means "**useless way of life**". The "way of life" in every society of this world is "useless" and "vain". And it is passed on by tradition. And that is something we need to be redeemed from. But for most people it is a hard thing to leave behind the traditions of their own people and to simply walk away from traditions that are frequently ungodly, foolish, useless and vain. And so most people are also not able to comprehend the truth of God and God's plan for mankind, because their own way of thinking enslaves them.

In the Church we also have traditions. And in the Church there is a place for traditions, to uphold commanded practices. But traditions must never be used as a vehicle for blocking a growth in knowledge and in understanding. Once traditions are used for the purpose of blocking and resisting a growth in knowledge and understanding, **at that point those particular traditions have been hijacked by Satan** to serve the identical purposes as do the traditions in the world.

In the world traditions stifle new understanding. And that should never be the case with traditions in the Church of God. And when some tradition prevents us from understanding something that is true, then that tradition is not godly! For example, the Jewish calendar is an ungodly tradition for members of God's Church, because it prevents people from understanding the truth about the use of the Jewish

calendar for our observances.

To follow Peter's instruction to "grow in knowledge" we have to expend personal effort to come to a constantly better understanding of the Bible. That's what Peter meant, and, as I said, that is the easy part to understand.

Now let's look at Peter's other instruction, the one Peter actually mentioned first.

GROW IN GRACE

What did Peter mean with this instruction? And how do we apply it? "Grow in grace" wasn't intended to be some wishy-washy nebulous general statement that you can't get a handle on. Peter clearly had something specific in mind for which he expected us to put out effort to achieve. What is that?

Have **you** grown in grace over the past decade of your membership in God's Church? How do you know?

Can you explain what that growth in grace has done to you or for you?

I don't want you to tell me what grace is! And I certainly don't want you to "give a testimony for Christ" or anything like that. The answer to my question is not a matter of defining grace. My question is: what has it done **for you**? How has it affected you? And do you actually **know** whether or not you have grown in grace? Is there a way for you to know?

Has it made you in any way different than you were before you experienced that growth in grace? And for you personally is that process of growth in grace still ongoing today? Or is Peter's instruction here something you have never experienced, and for that matter, never really understood in specific and concrete terms?

As I said, what did Peter mean with this instruction?

HOW WE HAVE DEFINED GRACE

It may not answer the question regarding what grace has done for us or to us. But we do need to understand what the word "grace" means in the New Testament. That's the starting point for our question.

And that is where we can easily be thrown off the right track. Many of us will recall that Mr. Armstrong time and again defined "grace", frequently with appeals to Webster's Dictionary, as: unmerited pardon, undeserved forgiveness, unmerited divine assistance, etc. And then that would frequently be followed by quoting Ephesians 2:8 ("by grace are you saved").

And in many biblical contexts that is certainly a correct understanding of the word "grace". But we need to be careful that we don't restrict the meaning of the word "grace" to "unmerited pardon". This meaning of grace applies to something God does ... forgive our sins in response to real repentance.

But that meaning of "grace" does not apply to something that we are to grow in. It should be obvious that Peter was **not** telling us to grow in how much pardon and forgiveness we need from God. Once our sins

are forgiven by God, then those sins are gone (Isaiah 1:18-19; etc.). And then those past sins do not require any additional grace.

To try to make this plain:

When the word "grace" is used to refer to something we must grow in, then it applies to something different from what the word "grace" means when it is used for God's actions. "Unmerited forgiveness" is something God extends to repentant individuals, but unmerited forgiveness is not something that grows with time.

Let's consider the Greek word in the New Testament that is translated as "grace". That is the Greek word "charis". This word "charis" is in fact derived from the word "chairo". This verb "chairo" means: to be joyful, to rejoice, to be glad.

When we are at the receiving end of grace (i.e. when God forgives our past sins), then that is **something for us to be joyful about**. It is a joyful act that God bestows on us when He forgives our transgressions. And we should be glad and thankful.

And when we are the ones who are to "grow in grace", then that means that **we must do things that will give God joy**! And the more joy we are able to give God, the more we will be growing in grace.

That is the heart and core of Peter's command that we are to grow in grace, that we do things that will give God joy.

So the meaning of the word "grace" remains the same. It means "to give joy". But the application of the word "grace" is different in different circumstances. When God extends grace to us, then God gives us joy by granting us unmerited pardon for our past sins. On the other hand, when we grow in grace, then we give God joy by the way we conduct our lives.

To be clear, "grow in grace" is not a command for us to keep the Sabbath and the Holy Days, etc. We already have those things commanded elsewhere in the Bible. This is not a command to do "that which is our duty to do" (see Luke 17:10), because then we would still only be "unprofitable servants" (same verse). And unprofitable servants certainly don't give God any joy.

We give God joy when we do things that are not explicitly commanded, as in when we do more than is demanded of us, when we make right decisions in difficult circumstances, when we correctly identify God's preferences, when our way of thinking approaches God's way of thinking. These are some of the things that will give God joy, and thereby cause us to grow in grace, because they allow God to see progress and development in us and in our character.

Grace is all about giving someone else joy!

Peter's instruction to grow in grace is simply another way of stating John's admonition that we are to "do those things that are pleasing in God's sight" (see 1 John 3:22), i.e. do those things that give God pleasure and joy, and in so doing we will be growing in grace.

Where John's statement focuses on what we are to do (i.e. do things pleasing to God), Peter's statement focuses on the effect it will have for God (i.e. give God joy). But these two statements are essentially aimed at the same outcome.

So the definition for the word "grace" in the instruction to "grow in grace" is: **grace is doing things that will give God joy, doing things that will please God**.

When people do not live by God's laws, then they are also not yet God's servants; they are still rebellious. Once people start to live by God's laws, then they become "God's servants". But if that is all they do, live by God's laws, then they are still unprofitable servants because they are only doing what is their duty to do. It is only when they do more than they are commanded to do that then they start to become "profitable servants".

Growing in grace goes way above the matter of keeping all of God's laws in the letter, because that is only on the level of still being "unprofitable servants". Growing in grace goes to our inner motivations for why we obey God, and how earnestly we seek to understand God's purposes and intentions, and how resolutely we are committed to God, and how seriously we strive to inculcate God's standards for everything into our own minds and into our own character.

So when we put Peter's two instructions together, here is what we have:

1) **Growing in grace** = becoming God-like in our character and in our perspective on life in general, thereby giving God joy and pleasure. Growing in grace represents the goal for our lives, learning how to please God and give God joy by the way we live our lives, an expression of the way we have changed.

2) **Growing in knowledge** = this represents the tools or the means for achieving the goal of becoming God-like in our outlook. Without this tool it is simply not possible to grow in grace, because right knowledge will teach us what actions and conduct on our part will give God joy. Without access to right knowledge, as is the case for all of the world's religions, people come up with all kinds of foolish ideas and reasoning and customs and traditions in their attempts to please God. Just look at all the foolish religious customs and traditions in the world around us. Growth in knowledge is the key to enable us to grow in grace.

Put another way: To grow in knowledge represents increasing in what we know and understand, while to grow in grace represents how we have changed our minds and our way of thinking away from a carnal mind that is hostile towards God (Romans 8:7). This changed way of thinking is a consequence of acting on our growth in knowledge. Growing in **knowledge** is something we gain; it is **in-coming**. Growing in **grace** is something we do; it is **out-going**.

Can you see how these two instructions work together?

IN THE PAST WE AT TIMES STIFLED A GROWTH IN GRACE

One major way that we give God joy is when we **make right decisions in difficult circumstances**. Abraham gave God joy when he unflinchingly determined to carry out God's command to sacrifice his son Isaac. The three young men in the Book of Daniel gave God joy when they were willing to be thrown into a fiery furnace, rather than bowing down to the king's idol.

Daniel gave God joy when he was willing to be thrown into a den with lions, rather than compromising his commitment to God. The prophets of old, who were prepared to be killed for bringing unpopular messages from God to the people of Israel, gave God joy. All these people made the right decisions in extremely difficult circumstances, and those occasions always produced a growth in grace in those individuals.

Those individuals all made their own decisions without some other human being telling them what to do. No other human being evaluated their particular circumstances for them, and then told them what they must do. They used their own minds in life-and-death situations, and made correct but difficult decisions.

And that gave God joy.

On the other hand, back in the 50's and 60's and early 70's many ministers expected the members of their congregations to come to them "for advice" (actually really for decisions) for all kinds of personal issues, ranging from whether to buy a house or a car all the way to whether or not to look for a new job or to move to some other city, and whether or not to start a pension plan or to take out insurance, and every other issue in-between.

Apart from the fact that the minister wasn't really qualified to make those kinds of decisions for members of God's Church, the main point was that **this approach stifled the opportunities for church members to grow in grace**! It took away the opportunities for church members to give God joy by making the right decisions on their own.

Understand something!

There is no growth in grace when we do what we are told to do by someone else! That's like keeping the commandments we have been told to keep.

So when some ministers were running the lives of people in their congregations, then that approach choked out a major opportunity for those church members to grow in grace. **There really is not very much reward for doing what someone else has told us to do.** This is something you may not have realized before? But that's the point of Jesus Christ's statement (paraphrased and adapted from Luke 17:10): we are useless servants, we have done that which we were told to do ... and what we've been told to do is keep the ten commandments. What this means is that some people can be Sabbath-keepers and still be useless servants to God. Did you know that?

When we do what we are told to do by someone else, then that never reveals what goes on in our own minds. The action we may take, based on what we were told to do, doesn't reveal anything about our own character. It doesn't reveal what we ourselves would have done **if someone else had not told us what to do**.

Specifically, that approach implies that we would not have reached the right decision without this other person (our minister) telling us what to do. And if we would not have reached the right decision on our own, then we also would not yet have developed the character that results from us reaching that right decision on our own, and the joy that process would have given God.

Understand that every time we are faced with a difficult decision, we have the opportunity to give God joy and to grow in grace. If we shunt that decision on to someone else's shoulders, then we also throw away an opportunity for growth.

I do not mean that we should not seek counsel and advice. **There are plenty of occasions when it is desirable for us to seek out good advice.** But after 10 or more years in God's Church we surely should have grown in understanding to such a point that we are fully equipped to readily discern on our own what is the right course of action before God in most situations that might arise for us, and regarding most decisions that we need to make. Consider how many young ministers back in the 50's and early 60's were handing out advice to God's people, which advice in some cases had major consequences, long before these ministers themselves had been in the Church for at least a decade.

Neither Abraham nor the three young men had the opportunity to seek some godly counsel before making the right decision in the circumstances that confronted them. And neither did "the Ethiopian eunuch" who was baptized by Philip (see Acts 8:36-39), ever have the opportunity to ask any of God's ministers for advice before making difficult decisions ... that man was on his own from the day he was

baptized.

I do not wish to bring up some of the ludicrous examples for which church members back in the 50's and 60's were encouraged to seek advice from their pastors before making a decision on the matter. The point is that for almost all of those decisions back then people didn't really need any input from their pastor. But they had been taught to get the minister's advice before making almost any significant decisions. And unfortunately all too many people looked to their ministers to make many decisions for them. That was not good.

As adults we will not grow in grace when we look to someone else to make decisions for us. When we are first baptized into God's Church, we may initially need more guidance than years later. But after our first decade in God's Church we should certainly be equipped to make most decisions ourselves.

Compare being in God's Church for a decade to studying physics or chemistry or astronomy or biology or economics or architecture or history for ten years ... would we still be asking some professor regarding every little question that might come up in our specific discipline? Or would we be confident enough to sort out most everyday questions on our own? The same should apply when we have been in God's Church for a decade or longer, all the while "studying to show ourselves approved". After a decade in the Church we should be able to confidently answer most matters on our own, if we are indeed studying and growing in knowledge.

And we should always keep in mind:

Using our own minds to make right decisions is an opportunity for us to grow in grace and to give God joy.

We should always encourage church members to make their decisions on their own, or within their own families, as much as possible. That will require them to analyze their own circumstances for themselves. With many issues this will lead them to asking the right questions on their own. And typically, one of the main keys for making right decisions is to address the right questions.

It is when they get stuck in this process, when they are not confident that they have reached the right answer, that then they should ask their minister for advice, i.e. in spiritual matters that involve the application of any of God's laws, not necessarily about all the mundane matters of their daily lives.

[COMMENT: Thankfully that is something we have largely come away from during the past two to three decades ... looking to the minister to approve the house or car, etc. we are thinking of buying, or the investment we are thinking of making. Today most church members, rightly so, don't seek their pastor's approval for making that type of personal decision.]

Let's consider a number of different situations.

<u>You have a Bible question.</u>

You go to your minister and say: "what does this verse mean?"

The minister replies: "you've been in the Church for over 20 years. What do you think it means?"

If you reply: "I don't know", then the minister says: "well, have you tried to look up the word that seems to be the difficulty for you? Can you think of any other Scriptures that might tie in with

this verse? Or can you think of a possible reason for why this verse says what it says?" Typically most people in the Church haven't proceeded that far down the road, because it is so much easier to just ask the minister to explain the verse. Of course, such people don't really grow in knowledge even if their minister provides the correct explanation, because they themselves have not really put out any effort to search out the correct answer. It is the process of arriving at correct answers that produces a growth in knowledge. People who short-circuit that process by just wanting someone else to give them the correct answers and be finished with it also short-circuit the process of growing in knowledge and in understanding.

On the other hand, **if you reply**: "well, I've looked up this word in the Hebrew text (i.e. you used Strong's numbers), but what I found implies this particular meaning ... and I don't see how that makes any sense. There must be some mistranslation somewhere, but I just can't figure it out. It seems to say the opposite of what this other Scripture over here says, and I can't see where one or the other is a wrong translation. Comparing this verse in other translations hasn't helped me either. I'm just stuck with this particular verse ...". **Then** the minister can say: "oh, I see where your problem is ...", and he then proceeds to lead you to the correct answer, assuming he knows the correct answer. And, if applicable, he might also show you how in future you yourself can go about detecting potential mistranslations. With the effort you yourself put out before even approaching the minister you will then be able to tie the correct answer into the research you yourself have done. You can then see the correct answer the minister has given you within the overall framework of your own research. And you will have grown in knowledge because of **the effort you had put out** to understand the verse in question.

It is much easier to internalize new understanding when we ourselves have been involved in the process of arriving at that new understanding, rather than having it presented to us on a platter. That is what Paul's instruction "study to show yourself approved" is aimed at, **personal involvement** in arriving at correct answers and coming to a better understanding.

The Sabbath commandment

You have a question about engaging in some activity on the Sabbath. You know that the actual wording in the commandment is that we are to observe the Sabbath (Exodus 20:8-11). To relate your activity to this commandment you ask yourself:

What is God trying to achieve with this commandment? What is **God's purpose** for this commandment?

Before God establishes any law or commandment there is always a specific intention. There is something specific that the law is supposed to achieve. The actual law that is then formulated by God is nothing other than an expression of God's desire to achieve that underlying purpose and intention. We need to see every law of God as a vehicle that is intended to convey God's intentions to our minds. In this process the intentions are always more important than the vehicles. The vehicles are the servants to the intentions.

A basic principle to keep in mind is this:

The letter of the law is always subject to the intentions underlying that law. It is never the other way around. Thus the underlying intentions are never subject to the letter of the law.

However, we need to recognize that the letter of the law is very easily subject to being misapplied and misinterpreted, because different individuals will assume different intentions for the law. And, very regrettably, for some individuals the letter of the law often becomes supreme, even at the expense of

sometimes thwarting God’s actual intentions.

To establish whether your proposed activity is right for the Sabbath, you need to establish God’s intention underlying the Sabbath commandment. If you can correctly understand God’s intentions for the Sabbath commandment, then your question will almost answer itself. And here I am not going to give you God’s intention; that is something I have done in some of my previous articles.

The point is this:

People who do not understand God’s real intentions for the Sabbath will invariably turn the Sabbath commandment into a burden! That is what the Pharisees did with their numerous picky rules for regulating virtually all possible activities they could think of (the Pharisees could think of 39 different categories of activities that they prohibited on the Sabbath) ... they didn’t remotely understand God’s intentions for the Sabbath. It follows that the pharisaical rules for Sabbath observance also have nothing at all to do with God’s commandment, because the Pharisees never understood God’s real intentions for the Sabbath.

Thus, for example, when the Pharisees were critical of Jesus Christ for healing someone on the Sabbath, because such healings supposedly constituted work, then God’s answer is:

When I gave the Sabbath commandment I was not thinking of preventing people from being anointed for healing ... or preventing Jesus Christ from saying certain specific words on the Sabbath (i.e. "be healed" or "rise up and walk", etc.). Those activities are simply not what I mean by "work" in the text of the Sabbath commandment!

Likewise, when the Pharisees were critical of Christ’s apostles for picking a few ears of grain for immediate consumption because they were hungry, then God’s answer might be:

When I gave the Sabbath commandment I had no intention of preventing people from picking a few fruits or grains for immediate consumption because the people are hungry. That is also not what I mean by "work". You are trying to apply My commandment to activities that I had no intention of regulating with that specific commandment. You are misapplying My commandment.

The letter of the law is never capable of adequately and perfectly expressing God’s intentions underlying any law. The letter of the law always falls short in some way. God’s laws are based on principles that cover far more ground than the letter of the law is capable of covering.

Growing in grace and in knowledge demands that we learn to correctly see beyond the letter of the law, and that we begin to correctly discern the underlying intentions for every law of God. When Paul wrote that "**the letter kills** but the spirit gives life" (2 Corinthians 3:6), Paul was pointing out that the letter of the law is inadequate in expressing God’s real intentions. Before God the underlying intentions always take priority over the letter of the law. To correctly understand God’s intentions for every law we have to start thinking the same way that God thinks.

Now when we progress to the point of grasping God’s underlying intentions for all of His laws, **then we are giving God joy**, and then we are growing in grace.

Consider another situation.

The Commandment to not bear false witness

You know that the ninth commandment says "you shall not bear false witness against your neighbor" (Exodus 20:16; Deuteronomy 5:20; Matthew 19:18; Mark 10:19; Luke 18:20; Romans 13:9).

Six times that commandment is recorded in the Bible. So you ask yourself the question: what is God trying to achieve with this commandment? Why didn't God just state it more simply as "you shall not lie", since God will have "all liars" thrown into the lake of fire (see Revelation 21:8)? It is self-evident that God does not like lying, and that Satan is in fact "the father of lies" (see John 8:44). So why didn't God simply say "you shall not lie"?

It would have been so easy in presenting the ten commandments to have commandments 6-9 say:

- you shall not commit murder,

- you shall not commit adultery,

- you shall not steal,

- you shall not lie.

Murder, adultery and stealing are forbidden without any limiting qualifications. So why didn't God also say "you shall not lie", without adding any qualifications? Why did God instead say "you shall not bear false witness against your neighbor", including a qualification that addresses a very particular form of lying?

For that matter, why didn't God anywhere in the whole Bible use the statement "you shall not lie"? It is not a matter of arguing for one side or the other. It is really a matter of seeking to understand **God's actual intentions** when He gave the ninth commandment and when God very deliberately did not say "you shall not lie". So exactly what is God trying to achieve with this particular commandment? And in this regard we'll also consider Colossians 3:9 and James 3:14 later.

To grow in grace we need to seek to understand God's actual intentions for every law of God, because that effort on our part is what will give God joy.

God's underlying purpose for the ninth commandment is **to protect** all people from being harmed in any way by lies! The purpose is to protect other people's innocence and reputations and possessions. Just like commandments 6 and 7 and 8 and 10, so the ninth commandment is also aimed at **protecting all people** from any kind of damage or slander.

In plain terms, God's thinking in formulating the ninth commandment was:

I don't want anybody to be damaged in any way by something untrue that anyone else may say about them.

God gave this commandment to provide people with a layer of protection from unjustified accusations or criticisms. That is why God's focus is on: you are not to do this **to your neighbor**.

But that is not the same as a carte blanche condemnation of all lies told in all kinds of circumstances, something that God could also have stated very easily, **had God wanted to do so**.

God's stated purpose in the ninth commandment does not in any way cover lies that are not:

- aimed at defeating justice,

- or at defrauding anyone in any way,

- or at harming anyone in any way,

- or at misleading anyone in any way that might lead to them suffering some kind of loss.

And so **we see a number of lies in the Bible for which no disapproval of any kind is indicated**. Here are some examples:

1) **Abraham** was never condemned for lying about Sarah. First of all, Sarah was not his full sister which is what Abraham wanted Abimelech to believe; she was only his half-sister. And secondly, her foremost status was that she was his wife, rather than just his half-sister. Her half-sister status had many years earlier been superseded in importance by her wife-status. Abraham very clearly intended to deceive Abimelech about his real primary relationship with Sarah, that she was his wife. But God did not condemn Abraham for this subtle lie, because in no way was that lie intended to harm Abimelech, though it actually did end up causing Abimelech enormous trouble. But Abraham was not bearing false witness against his neighbor.

2) **Rahab** was an inn-keeper and not "a harlot". But Rahab very blatantly lied about the two Israelite spies that had come to her (see Joshua 2:4-6). Yet Rahab was later spared (see Joshua 6:25). She is even commended for faith (Hebrews 11:31), but she is never in any way criticized for having lied. Her lie was also not in any way a false witness against her neighbor. And if we were able to ask God about this, God might reply something like: Rahab's situation is not the type of thing I had in mind when I gave the ninth commandment. What Rahab did is not what I mean to cover with the ninth commandment.

3) When, as recorded in the Book of Judges, Barak defeated the army of Sisera, Sisera fled on foot to the tent of **Jael**, the wife of Heber (see Judges 4:17). So Jael said to Sisera "turn in, my lord, turn in to me, **fear not**" (Judges 4:18). Jael was lying to Sisera because she intended to kill him! And she did kill him (see Judges 4:21). Sisera had everything to fear from the woman who planned to kill him. Jael lied to Sisera to deceive him, yet Jael is never reprimanded for this deception. She didn't bear false witness against her neighbor; she simply planned to execute an enemy of Israel.

4) **David** was fleeing for his life from king Saul. When he came to the priest Ahimelech, David lied to Ahimelech and said: the king has commanded me a business, and has said unto me, let no man know anything ..." (1 Samuel 21:20). **This was a plain lie.** Saul had not commanded David to do anything. Yet David is never in any way reprimanded for this particular lie. The lie was not in any way harming Saul or anyone else; David was fleeing for his life, and he lied about the person who was intent on killing him!

5) The **Apostle Paul** was in serious trouble before the Jewish Sanhedrin. To cause a division amongst his enemies, Paul cried out: "**I am a Pharisee**, the son of a Pharisee ..." (Acts 23:6). That was a lie! When Paul came into the Church, **he ceased being a Pharisee**. When Paul made this statement he was no longer a Pharisee. Paul is never in any way admonished for this lie. Paul made this statement to divide his enemies who intended to kill him unlawfully, not unlike the situation David had been in. He wasn't bearing false witness against anyone.

6) When Absalom had been killed by Joab, **Ahimaaz** the son of Zadok wanted to bring the news of this victory to David. But Joab decided to send Cushi as the messenger. After Cushi had already left, Ahimaaz eventually got Joab's approval to also run to David with this news. Now Ahimaaz knew very clearly that Absalom was dead. When Ahimaaz then reached David first, David specifically asked Ahimaaz "Is the young man Absalom safe?". **Ahimaaz then lied to the king!** Joab himself had told Ahimaaz "the king's son is dead" (2 Samuel 18:20). But Ahimaaz said to David: "I saw a great tumult, but **I knew not what it was**" (2 Samuel 18:29). Of course Ahimaaz knew what that "great tumult" was.

Ahimaaz did not answer David's question truthfully. Yet Ahimaaz is never in any way reprimanded for this lie.

7) We could also consider **Hushai** who deceitfully said to Absalom "God save the king, God save the king" (2 Samuel 16:16). While technically Hushai could have meant his statement to apply to David, Hushai was addressing this statement to Absalom, and he wanted Absalom to think that this statement was about Absalom. Hushai deliberately wanted to deceive Absalom. Hushai also deliberately gave Absalom bad advice in order to allow David to escape (see 2 Samuel 17:7-13). His advice was aimed at defeating Absalom, and it did. Yet Hushai is never reprimanded for the lying intent of his interaction with Absalom.

We need to acknowledge that **we find certain lies told in the Bible, which lies did not elicit any condemnations from God**. We need to understand why those lies are not condemned.

It is not a matter of finding some technicalities in order to justify those lies. God is never impressed by technicalities, since God always considers the intent (i.e. God looks at the heart, 1 Samuel 16:7). It is really a case that those particular lies did not in any way violate God's intentions for the ninth commandment. If we were to ask God about those particular lies, God might reply something like:

Those lies in those particular contexts are not what I had in mind when I gave the ninth commandment. Do you not yet understand what I am trying to achieve with the ninth commandment? **I gave the ninth commandment to protect the innocent and not the guilty.** You still need to grow in knowledge and in understanding.

One key to understand regarding this commandment is this:

Under no circumstances whatsoever is the ninth commandment intended to provide some kind of advantage or benefit or leverage for criminals, evildoers and those who oppose God! **The ninth commandment is not intended to benefit evildoers** and those who are guilty, and who are in line to be punished by God.

You don't have to tell criminals the truth which would enable those criminals to commit additional criminal activities. So for example:

1) A mob is looking for some totally innocent person to kill or to beat up (e.g. in some type of riot), and you happen to know where that person is hiding. They then ask you: do you know where that person is hiding? In no way would God want you to tell that mob the truth. This is basically what Rahab did for the two spies, protect them by lying to those who wanted to kill them.

2) You work in a bank or in some shop that sells a lot of merchandise and has much cash coming in. Robbers come in and say: where is the cash hidden? What is the combination code for the safe? Do you have any firearms here on the premises? It is clear that these criminals want to steal the money and/or the firearms that might be there. Again, before God you most assuredly are not required to give those criminals access to money or firearms. It is quite okay to lie to such criminals.

3) If your home is invaded by criminals and they ask you specific questions to extract information from you, you should have no qualms whatsoever about lying to those criminals.

In all these cases the key is to understand God's intent for the ninth commandment. God's intent is to protect the innocent! God is always on the side of the innocent. **Evildoers have no right whatsoever to truthful answers to their questions**, answers that would enable them to inflict additional harm and damages on their innocent victims. The evildoer gets no protection of any kind through the ninth

commandment. Those evildoers are themselves liars to start with. And God did not establish the ninth commandment to benefit liars and evildoers.

There are many situations where criminals, robbers, thieves, gangsters, deceitful crooks on the internet, burglars, scam artists, perverts, etc. ask you for personal information. God does not expect you to truthfully give such people the personal information for which they are asking.

For example, **why** would any website on the internet possibly need to have your birth date in order to allow you to use that website? With your correct name and correct birth date they can cause you a great deal of damage. So never provide the correct information to dubious organizations. It is okay to provide such websites with fictitious personal information, information they have no right to know in the first place.

As with all of God's laws, for the ninth commandment we also need to ask ourselves: exactly what is God trying to achieve with this law? When we understand God's intentions correctly, then that also clears up the matter of various lies told in the Bible, which lies were never censured by God.

Now let's briefly consider Colossians 3:9 and James 3:14, which both refer to "lying".

COLOSSIANS 3:9 AND JAMES 3:14

Here is Colossians 3:9.

Lie not one to another, seeing that you have put off the old man with his deeds; (Colossians 3:9)

The focus here very clearly is on: don't cause any kind of harm to any other member of God's Church. Here Paul could simply have said "don't lie", but he didn't do that. Rather, Paul added the qualification "lie not **one to another**". Paul was here clearly applying the concept of "against your neighbor" from the ninth command.

Paul wasn't thinking of situations where some people want to hurt us, harm us or kill us, the type of situation Paul himself had faced in the Sanhedrin when he claimed to still be a Pharisee. Paul's focus in this Scripture was on us not causing harm to other people.

If we were able to confront Paul with this matter, Paul would surely say: When I said "lie not one to another" to the Colossians, I did not intend my statement to apply to our interactions with evildoers who intend to harm us, or even kill us. Rather, I was directing my statement very specifically at how we are to treat fellow church members, people who will not approach us with deceit or animosity. I was in fact simply paraphrasing the ninth commandment.

Here is James 3:13-14.

Who [is] a wise man and endued with knowledge among you? let him show out of a good conversation (i.e. conduct) his works with meekness of wisdom. But if you have bitter envying and strife in your hearts, glory not, and **lie not against the truth**. (James 3:13-14)

With "lie not against the truth" James was referring to: don't live hypocritically; i.e. what goes on in your heart and mind takes priority over the words that come out of your mouth. In other words: in your outward appearance and conduct you may look like upright members of God's Church, but if your minds are filled with envy, bitterness, strife, jealousy, etc. then your outward appearance amounts to living a lie.

James is speaking here about living a lie, even when no actual verbal lies are involved.

Now the point is not that Paul and James somehow endorsed certain forms of lying; they most certainly did not do that! The point really is that both these writers were thinking specifically about our conduct amongst fellow church members. Our conduct must always be "as harmless as doves" (Matthew 10:16), causing no harm to those with whom we interact.

But dealing with extreme threats by evildoers was not something that entered the thinking of either Paul or James when they wrote these particular statements. They were simply giving instructions for our regular and typical interactions with fellow church members.

The point for us is this: God Himself clearly spelled out the ninth commandment as "you shall not bear false witness against your neighbor", rather than just giving us the simpler statement "you shall not lie". And both Paul and James are in full agreement with God's focus in the ninth commandment. And so we never anywhere in the Bible see the carte blanche statement "don't ever lie under any circumstances" implied by any writer.

Yes, we are not to lie, and we are expected to live our lives in integrity before God. But we should also understand that **God never intends His laws to benefit criminals and evildoers**. Criminals who break God's laws with contempt and disdain cannot somehow use God's laws to gain an advantage over those people who seek to live by God's laws in the integrity of their hearts. When the motive is **to kill** and **to steal** and **to destroy** the lives and possessions of innocent people, then violent criminals are most certainly not entitled to honest and truthful answers to their prying questions. God's purpose for the ninth commandment does not cover people who seek to wrongfully **extract information from us**, in order to gain some advantage over us. Forcefully extracting information from helpless victims is not what the ninth commandment is about.

To demand that Christians always answer **the questions of criminals** truthfully, questions like:

- what is your social security number?

- what is the PIN for your personal bank account?

- what is the code for your gun safe?

- where have you hidden your wife's jewelry?

- how do you disarm the burglar alarm in your house?

- where are your children?

- what is the Password for your account? etc.

... would in fact be a way of forcing Christians to cooperate with Satan! Those are all questions aimed at forcefully extracting information which would enable Satan-inspired criminals to engage in additional law-breaking activities.

I will tell you categorically that in a situation like that God does not expect you to answer the questions of criminals truthfully, because God is never on the side of criminals, and God's laws are never intended to assist criminals in any way in their law-breaking activities.

Growing in grace and knowledge and understanding requires that we come to recognize **God's real**

intentions for every law of God. And before God it is important that we don't transgress God's actual intentions for a law. This is something that the letter of the law is not always able to express without some ambiguity. Thus:

Whenever **God's intent** for a specific law does not apply to a specific situation, then **the letter of the law** likewise does not apply to that specific situation.

It follows that all those people who do not understand God's intentions for a specific law will also misapply that law. Thus, people who don't understand God's intentions for the ninth commandment may feel obligated to truthfully give criminals personal information when asked for that information by the criminals. Yet before God it is perfectly acceptable to mislead such criminals by giving them false information, as did Rahab, for example.

Human lawyers focus exclusively on the letter of the law, and they argue and debate about the letter of the law, while deliberately ignoring the obvious intent underlying the creation of that particular law. Lawyers don't care what the actual intent of a law happens to be. They focus on the wording of the law, and that is what they then argue about. We must never approach the laws of God with this particular mindset.

God's intentions are always supreme. And a growth in grace is achieved when we make a serious effort to understand God's actual intentions, and then seek to live our lives in agreement with those intentions. Such efforts on our part to understand God's intentions will give God joy.

GOD'S INTENTIONS OVERRIDE THE WORDING OF A LAW

The clearest example of God's intentions for a law always overriding the actual wording of a law in case of a conflict involved David eating the "hallowed bread" (see 1 Samuel 21:4-6). Jesus Christ referred to this incident as follows:

But He said unto them, Have you not read what David did, when he was a hungered, and they that were with him; How he entered into the house of God, and did eat the shewbread, **which was not lawful for him to eat**, neither for them which were with him, but only for the priests? (Matthew 12:3-4)

But if you had known what [this] means, I will have mercy, and not sacrifice, you would not have condemned **the guiltless**. (Matthew 12:7)

Notice that Jesus Christ very clearly said that it was "not lawful" for David to eat the shewbread. But at the same time Jesus Christ also said that in eating that bread David was in fact "guiltless". Three groups of people feature in that situation in Matthew 12, i.e. Christ's disciples, David, and the priests who performed sacrifices on the Sabbath (see Matthew 12:5); and all three groups were "guiltless" according to Jesus Christ.

To be clear: It is not that God somehow "forgave" David for eating the shewbread! It is really a case that before God **David was in fact "guiltless" when he ate that bread**! He was guiltless throughout that entire episode, even while eating bread that was not lawful for him to eat.

That is the point I am trying to explain regarding the ninth commandment!

David was guiltless because God's principle "**I will have mercy and not sacrifice**" is a foundational principle underpinning **all of God's laws**! So when asked about certain conflicts with the letter of the law,

any law, then in certain situations **having mercy overrides whatever the letter of the law may seem to demand**.

That is also the principle that applies when God is willing to "wink at the times of ignorance" (see Acts 17:30). The principle of God having mercy very readily overrides the letter of the law when sins are committed in ignorance. This also applies to the great majority of the people who will come up in the second resurrection and very readily have their past sins forgiven.

I say "very readily" because it is always easier to repent of sins committed in ignorance than it is to repent of sins where we knew we were doing something wrong. Think about why it will be more tolerable in the second resurrection for the people of Tyre and Sidon and Sodom than it will be for the people from Capernaum and Chorazin and Bethsaida (see Matthew 11:20-24). This principle of "I will have mercy and not sacrifice" is a major influence in that situation.

This principle of "I will have mercy and not sacrifice" applies as follows:

1) The Sabbath command doesn't mean that you don't provide water for your domestic animals ... because of the concept of having mercy on the animals and their needs.

2) Similarly, dealing with "ox in the pit" situations on the Sabbath (see Luke 14:5) is based on having mercy on animals and on people when unforeseen circumstances create a problem.

3) David and his men apparently had not had any food for about three days (see 1 Samuel 21:5), and they were starving. So allowing them to eat the shewbread again involved the principle of mercy overriding a restriction that would otherwise apply. Jesus Christ said that mercy was the deciding factor in this case.

4) When we are confronted by criminals, murderers, thieves, burglars, perverts and all kinds of evil men and women, who threaten us and seek to harm us unless we reveal critical information to them, then it likewise becomes a matter of God having mercy on us when we lie to those evil people to protect lives and possessions. **And like David, before God we will also be guiltless in such situations when we lie and mislead such evil people.**

This is a principle that God applies to all His laws, that God extends mercy in certain situations. This is not limited to holding starving people guiltless for eating the shewbread.

We really do need to understand Hosea 6:6, part of which Jesus Christ was quoting in Matthew 12:7.

For **I desired mercy**, and not sacrifice; and **the knowledge of God** more than burnt offerings. (Hosea 6:6)

And here is how Jesus Christ presented this particular point:

But if you had known what [this] means, I will have mercy, and not sacrifice, you would not have condemned the guiltless. (Matthew 12:7)

First of all let's notice that God desires mercy, but God equally also desires "**the knowledge of God**". Without a correct understanding of God's will and God's intentions (i.e. the knowledge of God) we are likely to misunderstand many situations and circumstances where mercy will be an influential factor, and other situations where mercy will not be a factor. The knowledge of God is the key to identifying those situations where mercy comes into the picture.

Next, notice that Jesus Christ did not quote the "I desired the knowledge of God" part of Hosea 6:6. Rather, Jesus Christ's statement "**if you had known what this means**" makes clear that the people Christ was addressing most certainly did not have the knowledge of God.

This statement "if you had known what this means" also tells us that all those who condemn "the guiltless" don't really understand God's intentions underpinning various ones of God's laws. In Matthew 12 it was the law about the Sabbath that people didn't really understand, and in other situations it may be other laws or commandments that people don't understand correctly, which will cause them to then condemn the guiltless.

You need to carefully think through this principle "I will have mercy and not sacrifice", and you should then understand why none of the lies I listed earlier were censured by God.

Over 40 years ago we visited a suburban housewife in a small town in South Africa, who told us that when a burglar about four weeks earlier had threatened to rape her, she had lied to the burglar and said: "I am having my period, please don't do this". **She lied** about having her period, but the burglar ceased trying to rape her and instead ran off with some of her money and possessions. She lied, but before God she was without question guiltless! I could list over a dozen similar examples that involved people dealing with criminals, and a number of those criminals were in fact murderers. And I have never hesitated in telling people in such dangerous circumstances to feel free to lie to such criminals, because God will surely hold them guiltless for such lies.

So much for the ninth commandment.

A major key in the matter of growing in grace is that we come to understand God's actual intentions for every law that God has given. Seeking such understanding is what will produce a change in our minds (I'm speaking about people who have already received God's spirit), to the point where we will come to evaluate everything that life presents to us from the perspective of how God would desire us to deal with all these things.

It is easy to say that God wants us to change the way we use our minds. But it is really a matter of us looking for the reasons that motivated God to give us the laws He has given. I've done that to some degree in this article for the fourth commandment and for the ninth commandment. But we need to use this approach for all of God's laws.

We have at times used the expression "**the spirit of the law**". In the past we have typically applied "the spirit of the law" to seeking to understand **the full range of application** of that law. And so we understand that the law applies to more than just one specific application which is identified by the letter of the law. However, we really need to expand the meaning of the expression "the spirit of the law" to **also focus on God's actual intentions** in giving a specific law. And God's actual intentions for a specific law may in some cases restrict that law's applicability to certain situations.

So when we seek to understand the spirit of the law, then we need to focus on both, the full range of applicable situations for that law, and also God's actual intentions for establishing that particular law. Put another way, when we are standing next to the letter of the law, then **we need to look forwards** to understand the whole range and scope of situations to which that law applies; and **we need to look backwards** back to God's original intentions for giving that particular law.

That is the way for us to understand the spiritual intent of God's laws.

So now let's look at some of the questions I asked earlier:

Question: Have you grown in grace over the past decade of your membership in God's Church? How do you know?

Answer: If you can see that you have come to a deeper understanding of the mind of God over the past decade, getting a clearer grasp of God's intentions with the laws God has given, then you have indeed grown in grace. Your improved understanding of the mind of God is proof for that growth in grace.

Question: Can you explain what that growth in grace has done to you or for you?

Answer: It has given you a new perspective for God's whole way of life. Obedience to God's laws is still as important to you as it ever has been, but now you have a clearer grasp of the profound differences between the way of life of this world and God's way of life. And now you have a better understanding of the actual intent behind various laws of God.

Question: Do you actually know whether or not you have grown in grace? Is there a way to know?

Answer: Are you still the same person you were a decade ago, or have you changed in certain ways? Can you look back at your own views and opinions of a decade ago about any number of things (e.g. your priorities then, your interactions with non-church friends and acquaintances, your view of the world in general, your main goals back then, etc.) and are those views and opinions the same as a decade ago or have they been modified? If your views have modified in such a way that you are confident that those modifications have brought your thinking closer in line with God's thinking, then that is the way to know that you have indeed grown in grace. Growth always produces changes. And those changes must take place in our minds.

Question: Has it made you in any way different than you were before you experienced that growth in grace?

Answer: Do you have a greater perception of your need to pray every day because you grasp more deeply just how much you need God's help and guidance every single day? If anything, has your resolve to pray daily become stronger over the past decade? Do you have a much clearer understanding of the Bible than a decade ago ... or did you back then already know it all? A growth in grace will lead to a greater commitment based on a greater understanding than a decade ago.

Question: For you personally is that process of growth in grace still ongoing today?

Answer: Growing in grace is all about giving God joy by the way we use our minds and by the way we then conduct our lives. Can you understand that your mind is going through a metamorphosis? Can you see that as your level of understanding of God's ways keeps growing, so your mind keeps growing as well? And can you see that for you that process of changing the way your mind works is not yet complete, that you still have a way to go? If you can see the need for your mind to continue to grow towards God's ways of using His mind, then that process is indeed still ongoing for you.

So how about it ... are you growing in grace?

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