

MAKING SPIRITUAL PROGRESS

A RED MOUNTAIN COMMUNITY CHURCH POSITION PAPER

PART ONE

Do you feel like you are making spiritual progress? Or is your spiritual journey really just spiritual wandering? Spiritual progress is the sense that you are moving closer to the God who made you, that your understanding of life is increasing, that you are becoming wiser. Most people feel the need for this. A spiritual journey is one thing. Most of the world is on one. But the real deal is spiritual progress.

There are many things you should know about spiritual progress. It will eventually involve every nook and cranny of your life. God will leave no area of your life untouched. Spiritual progress will take time, and to a large degree you will determine how much progress you make in any given time period. God will do much in a short period of time if you are up for change at a fast pace. Spiritual progress will involve times of great victory and celebration. It will also involve faith on your part, which means risk, uncertainty, fear, and many other things that are uncomfortable. Spiritual progress will involve critical seasons and strategic crossroads. You will have to take high stakes action that will either propel you forward to a higher plane, or freeze your progress wherever you are, maybe even set you back. All of this you will experience over time. But there is a key first step to spiritual progress.

Because God is the key player in real spiritual progress, the journey begins with being right with Him. How does one do that? It is precisely at this beginning point that most spiritual journeys run amuck. People set about getting right with God by doing “good deeds,” things that they believe will put them in His good graces. They approach it as they would building a relationship with another human. They act out behavior toward God that they have learned pleases people. It’s what they know and it usually works well with people. But it’s different with God.

It’s different with God, because He’s different. Though He is a personal being, He’s not a human being. We don’t have to get His attention, He knows us. We don’t have to convince Him we’re valuable or worthwhile. He knows we are because He made us! The problem between ourselves and God is evil. It is the reason we are separated from Him and feel the need to set out on a journey. It is the reason for the disconnect. Evil is not just outside us, it is in us. Evil is an instinctive desire within us to be our own masters and have God serve us. God calls that sin. We may be polite, respectful rebels, but we desire to swap roles with Him and have Him bring about for us our own agenda. That makes us sinners.

As sinners we embark on all kinds of spiritual journeys. But our spiritual journey is about discovering power for ourselves, or at least making ourselves more fulfilled or happy. This self-centeredness is a deep character flaw in each of us that we cannot cure ourselves of. Knowing this, God realizes we cannot possibly rise by our own efforts to harmony with Him. Our currying of His favor will always arise from impure motives. We don’t fool him. He’s different than human beings, because He sees our motives and they reveal something defective in us. By His own standard of justice He cannot ignore what He clearly sees in us. So, He cannot join Himself to us even though He desires to do so. The reason we’re on a journey and not arriving is the presence of this instinctive evil in us, evil that God cannot ignore.

The good news is that God loves us anyway! And so what we cannot do for ourselves, He has done for us. He became a man, the man we know as Jesus. By becoming a man He accomplished a number of important things. A very important one is that in His death, He bore the punishment for our evil. He substituted Himself for us and bore the penalty His justice demanded for our sin. It is as if when the time came for us to pay for our sin, Jesus took us out of the game and stepped in for us. The result is that full payment of the penalty for all of our flaws is available. As a result, what He wants to do for us, He can now justly do. And so He has chosen to forgive all who simply believe the bad news about themselves and the good news about Jesus!

So then, the first step in moving from one who is simply on a spiritual journey to one who is making spiritual progress is belief. It is an incredibly simple but profound step. Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ—that's the simple command of God to all who seek to be joined to Him. Your thought process in taking this step might be something like this:

I believe I am a sinner. There's just something in me that makes me want to control my own life and have you fit in, God. I've seen and felt that in me. That's bad news! But, I believe the good news—that You love me anyway. You became a man and You paid for my evil. You ask me to believe that, God. Since I do, I am now joined to You and can become who You want me to be. Lets begin God!

It is very helpful to express this thought as a prayer to God. You can and should do that right now. Just remember the prayer doesn't save you. Your faith and trust in Him does. He knows your heart and the moment you believed He forgave you. His Spirit has now been joined to you. You made huge spiritual progress by that step of belief. Now you can make more progress, because you have been joined to Him in the deepest part of your being.

Remember that because of evil in the world and evil that is in us, everything is wrong until God makes it right. You've developed patterns of thinking in the years you've been separated from God. Now He wants to change those to make them right. Spiritual progress is a matter of allowing God to separate out from you thought and action that is not in harmony with what is true. Knowing His thoughts will require the use of your mind. Your mind will need to be directed to His thought for you. Your thinking will be reprogrammed over time. Part 2 of this article will help you understand some of the things God has provided so that we can think His thoughts and make spiritual progress.

PART 2

There is no prayer that is guaranteed to be answered like your prayer for your own spiritual progress. You should continually ask God to help you grow up, and you should do so with great confidence. It is God's will for every person at all times. Nothing could be closer to His heart for you than that you grow up in Him. But that raises a question. Since that is true, why aren't more Christians experiencing spiritual progress? Why aren't churches busting at the seams with people who exemplify phenomenal spiritual growth? The answer to this dichotomy is complex. It is important to wrestle with it so that we have right expectations of God, of our brothers and sisters in Christ, and of ourselves.

First, we must affirm that a lack of spiritual progress in any of us does not occur because stagnancy is somehow God's will for us. It does not occur because God withholds His power from us. The reason for the shortfall when it occurs lies in us. It is certain that He has made available to us everything that pertains to life and godliness.

Second, we must understand that when spiritual progress happens in someone, we have witnessed both a miracle of God and something achieved as the result of that person's effort. God has placed within every believer His Spirit. The super-natural is constantly at work and happening within them. Spiritual progress would never happen apart from this dynamic of His Spirit working within us. At the same time the individual's will enters into the equation of spiritual growth. Are they listening for the voice of the Holy Spirit? Do they resist the Spirit? Are they ignorant of spiritual truth that relates to the situation they are in? It is important to understand that our spiritual progress is not automatic. In fact it is possible for any of us to fail miserably as a Christian in any moment of any day. And so the writings of the New Testament, all of which are directed at believers in whom the Holy Spirit resided, are full of specific commands and exhortations to be diligent. Our degree of spiritual progress is not predestined. We can and do retard it. To make spiritual progress, effort will be required of you. If you do nothing, your progress will be painful as God disciplines you. It will also be slow. So while your role in your own spiritual progress is secondary, it is still key.

Third, we must understand that spiritual progress is a process, a lifelong one that is hard to quantify along the way. It cannot necessarily be defined by predictable stages that occur uniformly according to the number of years a person has known Christ. Perhaps after a certain elapsed time with Christ a Christian should have learned certain things. That seemed to be an expectation of New Testament writers. But it was also their testimony that in a number of cases those lessons were clearly not learned. You must be patient with yourself on the one hand, and demanding of yourself on the other. It is right to expect and demand certain things of yourself. It is also right to extend grace to yourself as God does, and allow time. This process of growth toward maturity is referred to in Christian thought as sanctification.

Fourth, spiritual progress is impacted by sins of the past. In the course of our lives in an evil world we can incur some debilitating wounds. They can make faith and trust difficult. They can make all forms of self-denial and self-discipline elusive. They render relationships troublesome. It is certain that God forgives the past, completely. It is also true that He specializes in rebuilding lives. Spiritual progress involves battling past old thought patterns. They are not automatically dissolved. Undoing them and relearning can be complex. The damage done to some is greater than others and so they take longer to heal. You will find that your progress in some areas is very, very slow. You will wonder at times if you will ever get past certain things. You will, because His grace will be measured out to you each day in proportion to its challenges.

Fifth, making spiritual progress is a matter of embracing specific practices that fosters it. In addition to placing His own Spirit in us, God has provided certain things outside of us that become tools in the Holy Spirit's hands used to reshape us. We have a choice in the degree to which we expose ourselves to these things. The degree to which we are engaged with these instruments of God's Spirit impacts deeply our spiritual progress. The next article will deal with some of these specific tools that God wants to use in your life and how they can be implemented.

PART 3

Making spiritual progress is a matter of embracing specific practices that foster it. In addition to placing His own Spirit in us, God has provided certain things outside of us that become tools in the Holy Spirit's hands used to reshape us. We have a choice in the degree to which we expose ourselves to these things. The degree to which we are engaged with these instruments of God's Spirit impacts deeply our spiritual progress.

God knew that your spiritual progress would depend on a nurturing process. So He created something that you are a part of. It is a living organism that nurtures your spiritual health. You interact with the rest of that living organism and as you do you promote the spiritual progress of others and they help nurture yours. This living organism is an ingenious invention of God's. It is the local Church.

The local Church is primary in His plan for your spiritual growth and so you must be fully engaged with it. It is not just a matter of attending Church, though that is where you must start.

Fully engaged means several things. Fully engage with the Church by officially becoming a member of it. Fully engage by being a regular part of its meetings. To be fully engaged means to establish and maintain healthy relationships with people in it. It means to join them in remembering the Lord's death through communion. It means to join with a few such people that you trust and open your lives to each other for support and for accountability. Fully engaging with Christ's Church means to serve in your local church by using your spiritual gift. It means shouldering responsibility for its financial support. It means to be accountable to it and submit to its authority. It means to pray for its leaders and its members.

In doing these things God's Spirit will constantly be weaving your life together with others. Through supportive fellowship you will make progress together. God has no alternate plan for your growth. Don't ditch the organized Church. He hasn't. The things that follow do not take the place of the Church. In fact, being fully engaged with a local Church will enable you to draw more from the things below.

A second instrument of growth that God's Spirit uses in your life is the Bible. The Bible reveals truth about God, the World, and you. In it you will find truths that you otherwise would not know. This truth is conveyed to you on its pages through history, through poetry, through prophecy, and through letters. You have in the Bible an ordered account of God's thought for you that you can consult at any time. Read it on your own. Seek out opportunities to be taught by those who have greater understanding of it than you do. Involve yourself with others and discuss with them what you are learning. Learn from it at Church and study it away from Church.

Aside from fully engaging with your Church, a habit with regard to the Bible is one of the most crucial things for you to cultivate. Mature Christian people cite this as the number one thing that caused them to make spiritual progress. It is a good idea to start by simply reading it. Look up Matthew in the index in front, turn to it and begin there. Read a portion of the Bible each day until you have read to the end of the Bible. You have now read the entire New Testament. Along the way, begin to keep a pencil or pen with you to mark phrases that stand out to you as important. After you have read the New Testament go back and pick some sections that are of interest to you. This time read slower. Read each day until you read something that speaks especially to you. Write that thought down. Ask God what He wants you to learn from that. You are now hearing from Him, and that's the purpose of this habit. In time, turn some attention to the Old Testament.

If your habit breaks down, or never gets started, pick up wherever you left off. Simply do a re-start. Don't wallow in guilt and don't become discouraged. Just keep trying. It may take years to become consistent, but everything along the way will be worthwhile. Just stay with it. That's the best advice to give anyone who is seeking to develop any kind of devotional habit.

A third instrument used by God's Spirit to shape you is meditation. Write down on a card a verse from Scripture that has stood out to you. Place that verse on the visor of your car, or on the refrigerator, anyplace you can look at it during time when your mind is free. Ponder the words in that verse and the concepts behind them. Use times when your hands are occupied but your mind is free. Ask things like "Why is that particular word used here?" Observe the details of the language. Force yourself to wring the full meaning of each word from the text. You'll be amazed at the things you learn that never would have occurred to you if you had just read the verse. This activity of meditation is one that God says will lead to spiritual progress and blessing. He said to Joshua,

"Do not let this Book of the Law depart from your mouth; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful." — Joshua 1:8

A fourth instrument God's Spirit uses in your life is prayer. It is a way for you to talk to God about any and every concern you have. It is a way for you to experience His leading as you pray for others. You will minister to many simply by praying for them. Don't view prayer as just talking to God. Be silent before Him and sense what thoughts He might be placing in your mind as you are quiet before Him. He will speak to you in this way and nurture your growth. Pray with other believers and pray on your own.

Identify things you are anxious about and pray about these. Making a list can be helpful, but freshen it often or your praying will become mechanical. Put people on your list. Start with a few. Eventually ask them what's happening with them that you can pray for. You may wish to start a prayer journal. This is a notebook in which you write down the things you pray for, and thoughts that come to you as you pray. All who have done this have found it highly rewarding. Don't forget to worship in your praying. Worship happens when you commend God for who He is, for the great things he has done that describe what He is like. Praying for a period of time speaking only of Him, with no mention of words like I, or me, or we, can totally change your perspective on everything. Your problems shrink when you look at the greatness of God.

A fifth instrument in the hands of the Holy Spirit is ministry. Ministry is serving others with a view toward helping them make spiritual progress. Now you might ask, "How does my own progress come about if I busy myself with someone else's spiritual progress?" An important principle regarding God's family and kingdom is this, "Give and it will be given to you." We find that in serving others, we ourselves are served. In ministering to them, we are ministered to. I cannot reach out to encourage someone else and not be encouraged myself. It is a very curious thing, but it is an axiom of the kingdom of God that in giving, I find that I am given to.

Some ministry is very direct, such as teaching children, or giving money to someone in need. Other ministry is more indirect, like serving behind the scenes while someone else "delivers the goods." Both are ministry and you will find that as you minister and help push forward the kingdom of God in others, you yourself make spiritual progress. Ministry also becomes a catalyst for the other four things mentioned above. As we minister to others we become more engaged with our Church, with the Scripture and in prayer. So one of the most important things for you to do early in your spiritual journey is to begin to minister to the spiritual needs of others. You will experience great spiritual progress as you do.

There is very clear testimony that God has consistently used these five tools for centuries to bring about spiritual progress in his people. There are other tools, but these are key. These should be understood as what we have described them as, tools in His hands. They are not magical in themselves. Only as they are entered into with the anticipation and desire to hear His voice are they of value. He Himself is our source of nurture and growth, not routines. It is important to realize that our faithfulness in approaching these things in this way will largely determine our degree of spiritual progress. This is His plan and provision for us. He has no other plan.