

## The Fellowship Files (4) – Growing in Grace

The topic of sanctification is so vast that we cannot cover very much in one chapter. Applying the Gospel to all of life is the task of our lives. What we will do is provide a basic framework with which to see the picture of our growth in grace, the indicatives of that growth, grounded in the Gospel, and the imperatives of our growth, vitalized by our faith.

When we speak of growing in grace, we use the term “sanctification”. This word means to be made holy, to be set apart for God. When we talk of being sanctified, it means two different but related things; position and condition. We are sanctified perfectly, as to our position (cf. 1 Corinthians 1:30); we were set apart by being born again, justified and adopted into the family of God. That is our position; we are “in Christ”. Sanctification also refers to our condition, we are saved for good works, and are to continually align ourselves with the Bible and act accordingly.

The doctrine of sanctification can be spoken of as past, present, and future. With respect to the past, we were sanctified at the moment of conversion and declared legally holy (1 Corinthians 6:11). With respect to the future, we will be totally sanctified someday in our glorified bodies, and our practice will match our position before God. Presently we are being sanctified, that is, increasingly being transformed into the image of the Lord (2 Corinthians 3:18). This shows us that the nature of sanctification is transformation: we are being progressively conformed into the image of the Son who died for us. This is God’s decreed purpose (Romans 8:28-30).

In this course we are considering sanctification in the present time, the process of transformation into the image of Christ, by the Spirit living in us. The Holy Spirit brings the presence of Christ and the moral will of God to us. The Spirit uses the people of God, the Word of God, and the providence of God (circumstances God ordains) to mold and shape us. The purpose for which the Spirit is aiming in our lives is to be like Christ and the degree to which we are is the degree to which we are sanctified. The fruit of the Spirit should characterize our lives (Galatians 5:22-23). The root of this transformation lies in our union with Christ (Romans 6:3-4). The process is never completed in this life (Philippians 3:12-13). Nonetheless, we shoot for perfection (1 Peter 1:15-16). Until then, the process is a struggle against the world (1 John 2:15-16), the flesh (Romans 8:6-7 / Galatians 5:17), and the devil (Ephesians 6:11).

Our role in the process of sanctification involves mortifying sin, which means putting to death those things that belong to our earthly natures (Colossians 3:5) and conversely, putting on Christ (Romans 13:14 / cf. Romans 8:13). Matt Chandler puts it succinctly: “Find the things that stir your affections for Christ and saturate your life in them. Find the things that rob you of that affection and walk away from them. That’s the Christian life as easy as I can explain it for you.”

We must remember in our struggle against sin and towards sanctification, however, that we live in relationship with God on the solid foundation of justification. Our responsibility involves cooperation. God is the one who works in us both “the willing and the doing” (Philippians 2:12-13). We must not confuse justification and sanctification, but also not separate the two completely. We do not work *for* our justification (Ephesians 2:8-9), but we do work *from* it (Ephesians 2:10 /cf. Titus 2:11-14). Growing in grace is a continual process of learning to trust the truth (cf. John 8:31-32).

**Indicative / Imperative** – The commands to faithful obedience are grounded in the truths of the grace we have been given. It might help you to think of it in these terms. You have the talent, develop the skill. You have the treasure, start investing. You have the grace, use your faith.

- Romans 12:1-2 – based on all Paul has said about God’s plan from chapters 1-11, he then tells us how we should live.
- 1 Corinthians 6:18-20 – Paul bases his appeal on the Gospel.
- 1 Corinthians 15:58 – based on the resurrection, Paul tells us to live all out.
- 2 Corinthians 7:1 – based on the promises of God we are to clean up.
- Ephesians chapters 1-3 give us the indicatives (this is who you are in Christ), and chapters 4-6 give us the imperatives (this is how you live in accordance with that).

**A Picture of Sanctification** (Philippians 3:8) – Paul not only counted as loss, he actually lost, as we see him here down from his lofty perch and into prison. He did suffer loss; he suffered the loss of prestige, position, popularity, power, and personal well-being. Now he goes on to say that they weren’t even loss, but all things are refuse compared to Christ. It isn’t like losing anything at all, as his perspective changes. Paul represents the very best that religion, philosophy, tradition, moral excellence, and hard work has to offer – education, intelligence, doctrine, zeal, service, and so on. To be able to sweep aside all that and consider it refuse is to know Jesus experientially as enough. The imperatives of repentance are grounded in the indicatives of the faith God gives us. Holiness is rooted in forgiveness. God’s grace is given to us for repentance and it allows us to respond in faith to Him. God is the one changing our minds as we behold Christ and realize Jesus is more beautiful than anything else we would want to hold on to.

**Colossians 1:9-14** – You will grow in your understanding of God’s will, be filled with spiritual wisdom and understanding, increase in your knowledge of God, be strengthened with God’s power which will produce joy filled patience and endurance as you come to a greater realization that you’ve already been qualified, delivered, transferred, redeemed, and forgiven.

**Colossians 2:13-15** – things that don’t work – Legalism (vs.16-17) / Mysticism (vs.18-19) / Asceticism (monasticism) (vs.20-23)

**1 Thessalonians 4:1-8** – the Holy Spirit is the instrument of our holiness.

**2 Peter 1:2-10** – Grace is not opposed to effort, it is opposed to merit.

**1 John 4:9-11** – growth in love for God and man is a true mark of sanctification.

**Pain to Power** (1 Peter 4:1-2) – The truth is that the last part of the verse isn’t speaking of Christ but us. It is speaking about us ceasing from sin by suffering in the flesh. This is what Peter is telling us to arm our minds with, this very fact. Christ suffered in the flesh for our sins, most recognize that easily. But now, if we will suffer in the flesh then we will realize this power and cease from sin. Not all sin right away or ever, actually, but instead, in a very real way making very real progress in the process of sanctification.

We need to count the cost of intimacy with God. The closer we are drawn into Him the more we are exposed to His Holiness and the more aware we are of our own sin. That is painful, kind of like being drawn inch by inch closer to the sun and feeling the searing burning of the heat. Intimacy with God can be a painful place, but we learn to want Him more than we want to avoid that pain. To experientially know the power of God over the power of sin is worth it.

**Walking by the Spirit** (Galatians 5:13-26). The emphasis is on God's activity; the Holy Spirit is doing the driving (vs.18), and producing the fruit (vs. 22-23). Yet it is acted out through faith within our lives. To "walk by the Spirit" is to be led by the Spirit and the Spirit produces fruitfulness. Obviously the Spirit is doing the work, but you are following along in faith. This does involve your own will and you can deviate from the path, and disconnect. The Holy Spirit drives, but you have to get in the car and/or stay in the car. Romans 13:9-14 is a parallel of sorts to Galatians 5:13-26.

We can have holiness in our lives without legalism. The holiness comes as we walk by the energy of the Holy Spirit. Our freedom is not to indulge the flesh, or to injure others, or to ignore the law. The true liberty of grace is that it never violates our own selves (vs.13). It never violates God (vs.14). It never violates others (vs.15). Those are the three things our liberty will not do if we continue to walk by the Spirit. Paul reiterates this law of love again in vs.25-26. If we are being led by the Spirit we would not be violating a clear biblical injunction or instruction.

**Galatians 6:7-8** – Two columns, one is for God, the other is for the devil, and each thought, and each action, etc. is filling up one column or the other.

**Sowing and Growing** (Mark 4:24-25) – We have a never ending supply of spiritual strength, but our spiritual batteries are designed to keep us plugged into the source, and they run out without it. Not just *what* we hear but *how* we hear (Luke 8:18). This means whoever "keeps on having" – the Greek word is "echo", it keeps resonating in your life, you keep acquiring, receiving it, you stay in tune with the sound of the scriptures. Be careful *what* you hear, you don't let the bad stuff in. Be careful *how* you hear, you keep pouring the good stuff into your life and out to others. We grow as we sow, not just to our own life but to others. We become disciples when we help disciple others, because discipleship is truth transferred through relationship.

The more you use the more you will have, the more you spread the more seed you get, and the greater the possibility of a greater harvest. This is why Jesus said to take heed, He said some 30, 60, 100, and in this context says we increase as we use what we have. This is the whole set up for the Christian life, and the biggest problem for most Christians. We haven't grown up, because things don't resonate, there is no depth, and it doesn't really matter to us yet.

The way to make it relevant, and effective, is to keep spreading it around to others and to yourself (1 Thessalonians 2:13 / Ezra 7:9-10 – Study / Practice / Teach the Word). We are called to evangelize ourselves and evangelize others, we are called to be discipled ourselves and to disciple others. You say, "I'm too busy for all that, I have three children". Well then you have three disciples, don't you? Or do you? I am not trying to come down on you, I am trying to tell you that you can't blame God because His Word is true and you have to keep planting the seed or it won't meet your need because their won't be any crop because you wanted to stop. The

problem for Christians is if and how the seed is used. The reason we have no harvest isn't something blocking the soil, it is that we don't use what we have. What we use to minister that comes from what we have heard is going to reflect how we are spiritually fed ourselves.

**Filled with the Spirit** (Ephesians 5:18) – some people urge this as the answer to all our struggles, and in truth, it is what we need, to be filled with the Spirit. However, this is not speaking primarily of some instantaneous event, but rather a process, a lifestyle, as clearly seen in the verses that follow (vs.19-21), which show the context of being filled (cf. Colossians 3:12-17). The truth is that all Christians are Spirit filled to various degrees. Being filled is a process, it can be an instance, but it is spoken of more in terms of what is going on in your life, what you are being filled with. The fruit of the Spirit is indicative of how much you are filled.

**Two Enemies of True Sanctification** – When we have a real grasp on what sanctification is and how it is manifest in the believer, we understand the two sides of sanctification, that this is a dual effort with God (Philippians 2:12-13). When we focus too far to one side or the other of that equation, we end up with one of two classic errors, which we see manifest almost continually as an emphasis in some corner of the church.

### **Pietism**

- Pietism is the notion that sanctification (holiness) is a purely human work.
- Produced by too much emphasis on the human side of the equation.
- Pietism is a totally active approach to sanctification. It is up to you to defeat sin.
- This is manifest in various forms of legalism and asceticism, like the religion of the Pharisees, and the monasticism of medieval Christianity. It is also related to the effort of some to reintroduce the “social” gospel, whereby our good works for the poor and the marginalized are seen as the prime motivator towards godliness.
- Operative phrase: Go and get God

### **Quietism**

- Quietism is the view that sanctification doesn't occur until we give up striving for it.
- Produced by too little emphasis on the human side of the equation.
- Quietism is a totally passive approach to sanctification; it is an attempt to become holy by abandoning all effort and simply "trusting" God to remove the temptation to sin.
- This is manifest in the Deeper Life movements. Today we can see this manifested in movements whose focus in on a crisis experience which they say leads to entire sanctification, or those who promote entire consecration as an event.
- Operative phrase: Let go and let God

The truth is that sanctification is an ongoing struggle where we ask God to give us the will to win. The truth is that we are simultaneously justified yet sinful. There is no shortcut to

sanctification, and yet there is no hard road we have to travel without God. The operative phrase: Don't let go of God. To walk with God in "fear and trembling" (Philippians 2:12) is to understand that we will always be in a battle, but also understanding that God will give us the increased will to put on the deeds of holiness as we become closer to Him (James 4:5-8).

**Galatians 2:20** – The cross of Christ is not merely a distant historical fact; it is an event that we were a part of, personally and directly and powerfully. So, when Paul says Christ was crucified, he says that Christ crucified him also. The doctrine of our union with Christ means that every single Christian was also crucified with Jesus on the cross.

**Remind:** "*I have been crucified with Christ*" – Paul says it is a fact, I have actually already been crucified by God with Jesus Christ; God crucified me and I didn't do it myself; it happened and was completed in the past, once and for all, and never needs repeating. All my sins past, present and future were placed upon Him two thousand years ago on the Cross. Jesus died in my place and also I died with Him. So by Christ's death and mine with Him I have died to sin (Romans 6:4-11). It is a fact of history that Jesus Christ died on the cross. It is also a fact of history that the believer died with Him. But we are not only dead to sin; we are also alive in Christ.

**Renew:** "*It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me*" – We have been raised from the dead and now walk in the power of His resurrection. We walk in "newness of life" because we share His life. Christ's life is what I am to now live, not my own. Sin wants to be our master. It tries to get us to act like our old nature, and always seeks to control us. But in Jesus Christ, we died to sin; and the old nature was crucified. Christ's strength is what I now draw upon not my own. Paul was not describing an experience we should try to emulate or strive for; he was stating a fact. The practical experience comes as we yield to Christ's control (Romans 12:1-2).

**Repent:** "*And the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God*" – What kind of life is this? It is a life of faith, a saving faith that leads to a living faith. Walking by faith, this is what it means to walk in the Spirit. Paul didn't tell his readers to feel as if they were dead to sin, or even to understand it fully, but to act on God's Word and claim it personally. God does not command us to become dead to sin. He tells us that we are dead to sin and alive unto God, and then commands us to act on it. Even if we do not act on it, the facts are still true. Repentance and faith are two sides of same coin. We walk towards this truth; repentance and faith.

**Rest:** "*Who loved me, and gave himself for me*" – Christ loved me, but to get me into heaven He had to give Himself for me. That truth should course through the heart and mind of every believer. We need to remember over and over again that the past work of Christ's death on the cross saved me and keeps me. Christ's work in the past means I can work in His power in the present. You can also look at these four phrases backwards.

We remind ourselves of this truth, we renew our minds around this truth, we repent towards this truth, and we rest in this truth. Thankfully, we can turn around and start going the other way (1 John 1:9). We repent, reminding ourselves of the truth, and then we renew your mind, not so you can try harder, but so you can be free, so while we walk we can rest.

The right thing to do is to put the focus on the finished, completed work of Christ, which points us away from ourselves. Then you find yourself gradually crawling out of spiritual depression and wanting to do the things God calls us to do. This isn't a result of more Law in my life, but more Gospel.

Emphasizing the Law (what God requires) without the Gospel (what God has done) makes us realize that we can't do what God requires, so we give up trying. When the remedy to the Law (Gospel) is not presented, the hearer is left without any power to perform good works. Only the Gospel gives the power to obey. I know what to do; I need the power to do it.

Law begins with the question as to what man ought to do; grace begins with the question as to what God has already done. Faith acts on that. But many think that when the Bible tells us to work out our salvation, it means go out and get what you don't have – get more patience, strength, joy, love, and so on. But after reading the Bible more carefully we understand that real Gospel fruit happens, not as we “work harder” but only as we continually rediscover the Gospel. You could put it this way: rediscovering the Gospel is the hard work we're called to.

Christians need the Gospel as much as non-Christians do. Many problems come because we tend to lose and forget the Gospel. But we make progress as we continually grasp and apply the Gospel in deeper ways. The Gospel shows us that our spiritual problem lies not only in failing to obey God, but also in relying on our own obedience to make us fully acceptable to God, ourselves and others.

Character flaws develop when we try to be our own savior through our performance. Proud personalities come from basing our identity on our performance and thinking we are succeeding. Depressed personalities come from basing our identity on our performance and thinking we are failing. Instead of resting in Christ, we are actually resisting Christ.

Belief in the Gospel is not just the way to enter the kingdom of God; it is the way to address every obstacle and grow in every aspect. It creates a radical new dynamic for discipline and obedience. First, the knowledge of our acceptance in Christ makes it easier to admit we are flawed because we know we won't be cast off if we confess the true depths of our sinfulness. Second, it makes obeying God a thing of beauty instead of a burden. We delight and imitate the one who has saved us rather than try to get His attention or gain His favor. We now run the race with grace and in faith, “for the joy that is set before us” rather than “for the fear that comes behind us.” Believe the gospel: that is how we can keep our eyes on the target.

You see, the secret of the Gospel is that we become more spiritually mature when we focus less on what we need to do for God and focus more on all that God has already done for us. The irony of the Gospel is that we actually perform better as we grow in our understanding that our relationship with God is based on Christ's performance for us, not our performance for Him.

One reason we don't grow in ordinary, grateful obedience as we should is that we fail to remember God's love for us in the Gospel. If we lack the assurance that His love is meant to supply, our failures will handcuff us to yesterday's sins, and we won't have faith or courage to fight against them, or the love for God that's meant to empower this war.

Christian growth does not happen first by behaving better, but believing better, believing in bigger, deeper, brighter ways what Christ has already secured for sinners. Let's use a simple outline to show how looking to Jesus causes us to grow in grace (2 Corinthians 3:17-18). This is how we become more sanctified in practice.

- Here is the standard
- We don't meet the standard
- Jesus meets the standard perfectly, and He meets it for us
- Now we thank Jesus for that and we study Him, we worship Him
- We can now strive after the standard as an act of worship. It isn't about doing it perfectly; but it is about doing it purposefully
- We will not meet the perfect standard, but we continue in faith, knowing that He has met it for us, and so we follow Him

We need to rehearse this with one another, and remember over and over again that the past work of Christ's death on the cross saved me and keeps me. We remind ourselves of this truth, we renew our minds around this truth, we repent towards this truth, and we rest in this truth.

I have been crucified with Christ (past / justification). It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me (present / sanctification). And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God (present / sanctification), who loved me and gave himself for me (past / justification).