

Progressive Sanctification

Proverbs 4:10–19, 1 Thessalonians 4:1–8

Most of us intuitively understand that we don't just get up one morning and say, "I am going to be a concert pianist today." Experience teaches us that to become really good at something—like playing the piano, oil-painting, shooting a gun, executing a gymnastics routine, performing brain surgery, flying a jumbo jet—requires a lot of practice. Even if you are already skilled at a particular task, you need regular practice to keep up your skills. This is why the military conducts regular practices for its units. If you don't practice you are likely to become rusty and lose your prior expertise. If you are an active competitor you know that you have to practice. Even if you have won prizes before, if you let your guard down, a competitor may surpass you.

It is the same way with our Christian life. We have been born again by God's Holy Spirit. He has convinced us of our sin and misery. He has enlightened our minds in the knowledge of Christ. He has renewed our wills. He has given us a desire to know him. He has given us a spiritual appetite, a hunger to know the holy Scriptures, to know the God who has called us into a relationship with himself. He has given us the gift of faith. Whereas before, we wanted nothing to do with God, now we know that he is our true portion forever. The things of this world are going to pass away, but our Lord can never be taken from us! He is the desire of our hearts. We want to seek his face in prayer. We know we are Christ's, but at the same time, we realize that there is still so much to learn. How do we make progress in the Christian life?

Last week we considered Paul's eloquent prayer for the church. The heart of his prayer is this phrase: "may the Lord make you increase and abound in love to one another and to all people." As I said last week, "increase" means to become greater in number. When a family increases, new people are added. "Abound" means to be present in great quantity. An abundant harvest means a bumper crop, your fruit trees laden, hanging low with fruit.

Here is our Lord's goal for us, to be realized at the judgment seat of Christ. At that time it will be established: Were we men and women of God? Did love for God and for his people inflame our hearts and motivate us to greater service? When Paul uses the phrase "make you increase and abound" he is describing the process of sanctification. He picks up the theme again in our text this morning: "Finally, brethren, we urge you to *abound more and more*." We are going to focus our attention on verses 1–3a of our text and consider the rest next week. We will consider three things: (1) What is sanctification? (2) How does it happen? and (3) Why is it important? first,

1. What is sanctification?

Paul tells us that we should “abound more and more.” He follows it up by saying, “this is the will of God, your *sanctification*.” What is he talking about? The English word *sanctification* comes from Latin roots meaning *to make holy*. In the Bible, anything that God claims for his own is holy. In the Old Testament the Jews were to be a holy people unto God. Among the Jews the Levites were holy. The priests and Levites handled the holy things: the tabernacle and its furnishings, the sacrifices, and so on. In the New Testament, those who belong to Christ are a holy people, and it is our duty to pursue holiness, or sanctification. Easton helpfully observes that “sanctification involves more than a mere moral reformation of character, brought about by the power of the truth: it is the work of the Holy Spirit bringing the whole nature more and more under the influences of the new gracious principles implanted in the soul in regeneration. . . . sanctification is the carrying on to perfection the work begun in regeneration, and it extends to the whole man.”¹

Sanctification is the work of God’s Holy Spirit. All of us by nature are dead in trespasses and sins—spiritually dead. The truth of God means nothing to us. We have no desire to know the God who created us and who gives our life meaning and significance. God made us to have a relationship with himself. He made us so that we might know him. Jesus explained: “this is life eternal, *that they might know thee*, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent.”² God the Son is addressing the Father. He is explaining that the chief end—the chief goal of life—is to know God. Not just to know *about* God. To *know* God.

A young man looking to get married may learn a lot about a particular woman. He might gain information about her by observing her as she interacts with other people. How does she treat other people? He might ask her friends what she is like. Does she keep her promises? Is she a woman of her word? He might be able to find out a lot about her on social media. He might compile a lot of information about her. But that is not the same as *knowing* her—actually sitting down with her and talking to her and having a relationship with her. It is the same with God. God reveals himself through nature. The heavens declare the glory of God. God reveals himself through the holy Scriptures. We can read the Bible for ourselves. We could be an atheist or agnostic who reads the Bible looking for mistakes. (By the way, God’s word is perfect. There are *no* mistakes in it.) Sometimes a noted atheist publishes a book alleging that the Bible is full of mistakes. But to read the Bible looking for mistakes is to miss the point. God gave his word to his church to reveal himself to his people whom he loves. There is no way to know the Bible or to know God apart from a true, Spirit-wrought faith.

If my enemy hired a private investigator to dig up dirt on me, trying to build a case against me, and he came to interview me and was hostile, I might answer his

¹ Easton’s Bible Dictionary (Logos Bible Software)

² John 17:3

questions, but I would never reveal my true self to him. I would intuitively understand that his purpose was not to help me but to *destroy* me. There is no way that I would let down my guard and reveal my true self to him! So it is with a man or woman who reads the Bible with the aim of trying to debunk it or destroy the faith of Christians. The Bible says, “*By faith* we understand.”³ If you do not approach the Bible with an attitude of faith—with the prayer, “Lord, I want to know you; help me to understand your word”—then you will never understand it. This has repercussions for all of life as well. Unless we come to know the true God who has revealed himself through his Son, Jesus Christ, then all life is in vain. We might earn a vast fortune, we might have the most incredible experiences, we might pursue things that please us, but if we do not know God, then we will die without Christ and go to eternal punishment. Jesus declared, “What shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?” Pity the rich man who does not have Christ! He might think he has the world by the tail, but he is not rich toward God. Someday he will learn that earthly riches are not everything. We were made to have a relationship with God, and the rich man didn’t value that. He gained the whole world but lost his very soul. How sad!

Sanctification is the work of the Spirit whereby we are renewed in our persons after the image of God. The goal of sanctification is that we become more and more Christlike. The writer to the Hebrews reveals that “in these last days [God] has spoken to us by His Son, whom He has appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the worlds.” The Son—the second Person of the Holy Trinity, who was sent to this earth to take on our nature and go to the cross to die for our sins—is “the brightness of His glory and the express image of His person.”⁴ The New American Standard Version has “He is the radiance of His glory and *the exact representation of His nature*.” In other words, Christ the Son perfectly represents the glory of the triune God; he is like the Father in every way. This cannot be said of anyone else in all of history. The Son does not *need* to be sanctified, for he is already perfectly like God. As Paul teaches in Romans 8:29, we who believe in Christ are “predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son.” That will certainly come to pass, but it will never be perfectly realized until the life to come. “Beloved, now are we the sons of God, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be: but we know that, when he shall appear, we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is.”⁵ In the mean time, as our Shorter Catechism teaches, “We are enabled more and more to die unto sin, and live unto righteousness.”⁶ We will consider this more in depth in point two,

³ Heb. 11:3

⁴ Heb. 1:2, 3

⁵ 1 John 3:2

⁶ <https://opc.org/documents/SCLayout.pdf#page=23> accessed 3-2-24

2. How does it happen?

Paul writes, “Finally then, brethren, we urge and exhort in the Lord Jesus that you should abound more and more, just as you received from us how you ought to walk and to please God.” Note to whom Paul addresses his comments: to Christian brethren, members of the church in Thessalonica. These are not just helpful suggestions. Notice the strong words “urge” and “exhort.” The apostle is assuming a serious tone here. As we have seen throughout this epistle, he deeply loves this congregation. He sincerely longs to see them again. He clearly wants what is best for them. Yet he is not resorting to flattery. He is requiring something of them here: namely, obedience.

Here are committed Christians who are practicing their faith. Paul has commended them for their “work of faith, labor of love and patience of hope.” They had turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God. These were not backsliders who needed to repent and get back on the right path. They were the real deal.

Paul exhorts them to “abound more and more” in the faith. The basic meaning of the word translated “abound” is to *overflow*. It reminds me of Psalm 23:5, where the Psalmist says, “my cup runneth over” (“cup” is figurative here, standing for every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus). The believer’s cup of blessing is filled to the brim! Our God is a generous God. He gives goodly gifts. He is not stingy or miserly. As our Lord said, “Give, and it will be given to you: good measure, pressed down, shaken together, and running over will be put into your bosom.”⁷ If other people are generous to us (because of common grace), how much more is God! He is the giver of every good and perfect gift. He gives a feast and kills the fatted calf.

Imagine a dinner party. The host has invited his good friends and close associates. He wants to impress them with his generosity. As in the feasts of ancient Persia, the kingly host orders his servants to serve all his guests with royal wine in abundance, according to the generosity of the king. No one would be compelled to drink, but every guest would be served according to each man’s pleasure. There would be abundance, not scarcity.

Paul exhorts the Thessalonians to “abound more and more” in the faith. He doesn’t want them to dabble in the faith. He doesn’t want them to worship only when it is convenient—when they’ve got nothing better to do. He doesn’t want them to give God the leftovers. Just as worshippers in the Old Testament were to bring their best to offer to the Lord—the best of their firstfruits, the best of their flocks and herds, the best of their new wine and oil—so we who are the recipients of the promise, the Substance and not the shadows—ought to be totally committed

⁷ Luke 6:38

to him who loved us and gave himself for us. “God so loved the world that he *gave*.” He gave his best—the darling of heaven, his beloved Son. In return he wants us to “abound more and more in the faith.” He wants us to serve him generously, and in return he promises that “he who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. So let each one give as he purposes in his heart, not grudgingly or of necessity; for God loves a cheerful giver” (2 Cor. 9:6–7).

Previously I said that sanctification was the work of God’s free grace, a work of his blessed Holy Spirit. Yet in our 1 Thessalonians text this morning Paul, as the apostle of Christ, urges us to “abound more and more . . . to walk and to please God.” This is consistent with the seminal passage Philippians 2:12–13, where he directs us to “work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure.” Paul is not telling us to save ourselves, but rather to make every effort to do the good works that are the fruit of true faith. As he clearly teaches in Ephesians 2, we are saved “by grace . . . through faith . . . unto good works.” If we truly trust in Christ alone for our salvation, the good works that we do are evidence of the Spirit’s regenerating work. Do you want to know that you are born again? Then ask yourself two sets of questions: (1) Do I love God? Do I long for him as my highest good? and (2) Do I love to obey God? Do I delight to do the good works commanded in his Word?

How does sanctification happen? Produced by the Holy Spirit of God, continuing the work he began in regeneration, the Spirit-filled believer gladly commits himself to abound more and more in love and good works. This does not happen automatically. Rather, it is intentional. Child of God, do not be content with spiritual stagnation, resting on past attainments. Dedicate yourself to see the process of sanctification continue and accelerate in your life. Pray, “Lord, I desire to be conformed to you. Give me a hearty love for you, as you reveal yourself in your Word. Give me a love for my fellow Christians. Help me do the good works that please you.”

We have considered (1) What is sanctification? (2) How does it happen?

Thirdly, let’s consider

3. Why is it important?

Consider with me two reasons, revealed in our text: (1) It pleases God, and (2) It is the will of God.

First, it pleases God. Paul writes: “how you ought to walk and to *please God*.” Elsewhere Paul writes that the married woman “cares about the things of the world—how she may please her husband.”⁸ It is a good thing for a wife to please her husband! She wants to look nice for him. She wants to serve him meals that he enjoys. She wants to have a pleasant demeanor around him. She loves him, so she

⁸ 1 Cor. 7:34

wants to please him. Likewise, a loving husband wants to please his wife. He wants to make her life happy. It is natural that we would do these things. The Bible says, “he who loves his wife loves himself.” The best thing that a Christian husband can do is to love his wife. A selfless love for his wife brings many happy returns. Likewise, the best thing a Christian wife can do is to love and serve her husband. If both serve each other, then their home is a very happy place.

If we want to please our spouse, then how much more should we want to please God! He is the source of every spiritual good. In his presence are pleasures forevermore. What do we have to gain by displeasing him? Nothing. Actually, the opposite is true. When we displease God we bring his displeasure. The lesson here is that when we abound more and more in sanctification, it pleases God. It makes him happy. It is his perfect plan.

The second reason is this: it is the will of God. “This is the will of God, your sanctification.” The Spirit-filled son or daughter of God prays with the Psalmist, “*Teach me to do thy will*; for thou art my God: thy Spirit is good; lead me into the land of uprightness” (Ps. 143:10). A lot of Christians agonize over how to discover the will of God for their lives. But here it is: “This is the will of God, your sanctification.”

If we are born again by the Holy Spirit, then we will gladly commit ourselves to abounding more and more in sanctification. We will not be content to rest on past attainments. We will boldly go down the path of becoming more and more like our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Our Old Testament text says, “The path of the just is as the shining light, that shineth *more and more* unto the perfect day.” This is progressive sanctification. It is an acknowledgment that when we come to Christ we do not instantly become fully mature disciples of Christ. We have to grow. We have to persevere. We have to press on to maturity. This we gladly do, by his grace.

In a moment we will sing our hymn of response, “Christian hearts in love united, search to know God’s holy will. Let his love, in us ignited, *more and more* our spirits fill.” Scripture teaches us that we are to love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength—with our whole being. Secondly, we are to love our neighbor as we love ourself, starting with our Christian brothers and sisters, fellow-members of the body of Christ. Here is a description of Christ’s church: Christian hearts in love united, seeking to know God’s holy will. As we know it more and more, we realize that God’s will for us is about *love*—love for God and love for neighbor. As those who are born again of the Holy Spirit, we want the love of Christ to be ignited in our souls, motivating us, impassioning us, more and more filling our human spirits with devotion to God and to his people. To the degree that this happens, we are more and more sanctified. This is progressive sanctification realized: the life of Christ displayed in our life, evident for all to see. Imagine the

power of a whole church evidencing that love—a whole church showing pure love for God and selfless love for others! The hymn describes a people on fire for the Lord, ignited by the love of God, wanting to spend and be spent for the glory of God: “Let his love, in us ignited, more and more our spirits fill.”

Imagine the power of a whole church evidencing that love! May we be that church, to the glory of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.