

10. Sanctification in God's grace

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I heard a story of the young man in Brazil who crawled 14 miles on his knees to his girlfriend's house to show her how much he loved her and how sorry he was for whatever he did to offend her. People lined the road to watch this man crawl to his girlfriend's, but when he arrived, she wasn't even there. Pleasing our God doesn't require us to be on our hands and knees all the time, rather we simply live the life of Christ in us.

Growing in grace is a crucial issue because the Bible commands us to grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ according to 2 Peter 3:18. Besides, the only alternative to grace in the Christian life is self-effort, which can be as futile as that young Brazilian's long crawl to an empty house.

We love to sing songs about God's grace, but growing in grace each day is often another story. Why is this so hard to do? One reason is that grace is a foreign environment to us, much like a person moving to a foreign country and trying to get accustomed to the language and culture. The Bible says we have to grow in grace because it is not our normal way to live.

Because we were born in sin, no one had to show us how to act out our sinful nature. But we will spend the rest of our lives learning what it means to live by grace. The Bible never commands us, "Grow in the Law." You will never read in God's Word, "Become better at keeping the rules." It does command us to obey God, and growing in obedience is part of what it means to grow in grace. Grace and growth are two sides of the same coin. Our goal in this morning's study is to help all of us grow in grace.

A. A WONDERFUL GIFT

Learning about God's grace is like opening one of those huge gift baskets at Christmas. Every time you think you've found all the goodies in the basket, you reach in a little deeper and find "something else wonderful just waiting to be discovered and enjoyed.

Here's a case in point.

Ephesians 2:5 even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved)

It would have been enough if God had put a period after this tremendous declaration and be done with it. But wait, there is more. God's grace doesn't stop there.

Ephesians 2:6 and raised us up together, and made us sit together in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus

Now, in case you think this relocation is just a figure of speech or a nice thing that we will experience someday, notice the tense of the verbs. God "*raised*" us up and "*made us sit together,*" past tense. It's already been done. You may be living on earth, but your true existence is in heaven.

We know that Christ is seated at the right hand of God according to Hebrews 10:12, which is the position of power and divine favor. That means Jesus Christ can make any request of His Father and know that it will be something else wonderful just waiting to be discovered and enjoyed. So if we need power, wisdom, strength in

temptation, victory over sin, or any other spiritual blessing, we find them at God's right hand where Jesus is seated and we are seated with Him.

B. GOD'S ETERNAL KINDNESS

Ephesians 2:7 that in the ages to come He might show the exceeding riches of His grace in His kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.

Here Paul tells us why God loved us, saved us, raised us up with Christ, and seated us with Him in the heavenly places.

Ladies, imagine being married to a man whose every waking moment is spent doing new acts of kindness to prove his love for you. I know what kind of question you have in mind: "Where is he? That ain't my husband."

This will never happen on earth because nobody is capable of that kind of endless grace and kindness. But during the endless ages of eternity, God is going to show us the "*exceeding riches of His grace*." This is part of what will make heaven so glorious. Think of all that God has blessed you with on earth, and then try to imagine what His kindness will be like when all the limitations of the earth are removed. God's grace will keep flowing in a never-ending stream, and no two gifts will be alike because He is infinite.

That's what God has waiting for us in heaven, and He has no problem telling us about it up front. And by the way, Christianity is the only religion that promises heaven up front. Other religions, and the cults, generally keep their followers in the dark about their future destiny so they can keep the troops in line and working hard to earn God's favor.

Don't get me wrong. This doesn't mean that as Christians we get off without working. But there's a world of difference between serving God out of gratitude for His grace and trying to earn His grace by our works. The moment you came to Christ, God brought you back from the dead and seated you with Jesus Christ in heaven. Your eternal future is secure because heaven is included in the package called God's grace.

C. GOD'S SUPER-ABUNDANT GRACE

Perhaps you are thinking, "This sounds great, but how can I grab hold of the grace I need now to grow in Christ, endure trials, and live victoriously?" I am glad that you asked.

I want to answer this with the most powerful verse about grace in the Bible. But first, let me clarify that the grace we are talking about here is not saving grace but grace to live the Christian life after you are saved. God's promise of abundant grace is found in today's memory verse:

2 Corinthians 9:8 And God is able to make all grace abound toward you, that you, always having all sufficiency in all things, may have an abundance for every good work.

I know that the main context of this verse is our giving to God's work, which is one important aspect of the Christian life. But take another look at the occurrences of the word "all" in this passage. They are a comprehensive statement of God's grace; the ability to give flows out of this abundance.

You see, God will always relate to us in grace, and He has all the grace we need. But the grace is related to our need. We don't get tomorrow's grace today. We don't get dying grace until we're dying. We don't get grace to face temptation until we're being tempted. God has grace available for every situation that is over and above the need. Make no mistake about it – God's throne is "the throne of grace."

D. WHAT THE DEVIL DOESN'T WANT YOU TO KNOW ABOUT GOD'S GRACE

Hebrews 4:15-16 For we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

The devil doesn't want you to know this, but the truth is that you can approach the throne of God any time – 24 hours a day. The devil wants us to believe that approaching God in prayer is based upon a point system. He wants us to think, "If I have been a good Christian, I can approach God. But if I have sinned, God will not hear my voice." There is a Greek word for that – Hogwash.

Christians can approach God any time because our relationship with the Almighty is not based on what we have done for Him, rather it is based on what Jesus did for us. Jesus' sacrifice on the cross applies to us when we are down as well as when we are up. In the process of life, we will confess our sins and ask God to forgive us. But all the while, we possess access to go boldly to the throne of God.

Nevertheless, the devil is telling us we are not good enough to pray to God. No doubt that's what he whispered into Adam's ear after he sinned against the Lord. "Hide when the Lord comes," he probably said. And when the Lord came into the garden, there was Adam hiding from God when he should have been seeking Him for forgiveness.

The next time you fall into sin, turn to God and go to church for help. All too often we think, "I can't go to church now. Church is for godly people." We need to remember that church is a hospital for saints and sinners. So when the devil says, "You are not worthy," don't hide from God. Run to God and receive help from Him and His people. The grace of God that helps us live in this world is more than we can comprehend.

E. OUR RESPONSE TO GOD'S GRACE

Ephesians 2:8-10 For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, 9 not of works, lest anyone should boast. 10 For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them.

Grace should not lead us to try to take advantage of God's goodness by sinning all we want, or by doing nothing while soaking up His favor. God has work for us to do, but He doesn't want us serving Him because we're trying to earn our own way. That is working against grace. God wants us to serve Him in response to His relationship of love and grace with us.

In discussing his own life, Paul said, "I labored more abundantly than they all" in 1 Corinthians 15:10, referring to the other apostles – although he added, "yet not I, but the grace of God which was with me." Paul knew that he was created in Christ for good works, but his service for the Lord was not a burdensome duty. His goal in everything was to know Christ more intimately.

Grace is cultivated and grows by relationship, not by rules or endless spiritual rituals. This is true because grace is not just a doctrine but a person. The deeper our relationship with Christ, the greater the experience of grace and therefore the greater the spiritual growth.

We know the grace of God that saves us from our miserable life to the life that is filled with hope and love from our Lord. After that, we need the living grace of God that helps us have a sanctified life that glorifies the Lord.

Philippians 1:6 being confident of this very thing, that He who has begun a good work in you will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ;

This, perhaps, is the clearest of all the biblical statements regarding God's role in our sanctification. Not only did God rescue us from the penalty of sin, but He continually rescues us from the power of sin. And when He takes us to heaven, He'll remove us from the presence of sin. Until then, He promises to promote our daily development in righteousness until Jesus returns. He does this by empowering us through the Holy Spirit.

An excellent example of the proper responses to God's grace would be Mary Magdalene:

Mark 16:9-11 Now when He rose early on the first day of the week, He appeared first to Mary Magdalene, out of whom He had cast seven demons. 10 She went and told those who had been with Him, as they mourned and wept. 11 And when they heard that He was alive and had been seen by her, they did not believe.

Mary Magdalene was the victim of the demonic forces. She was possessed not just by 1 demon, but by 7. These dreadful demonic spirits caused much pain and havoc to this poor woman in which they had found a lodging. She was hopeless with no end. She could not help herself, and no human power could set her free. But Jesus passed that way, and without being asked and probably while being resisted by the poor demoniac, He spoke the word of power, and Mary of Magdala became a trophy of the healing power of Jesus. All seven demons left her, left her never to return, forcibly ejected by the Lord of all.

What a blessed deliverance! What a happy change! From devastation to delight, from despair to peace, from hell to heaven! Immediately she became a constant follower of Jesus, listening to His every word, following His winding steps, sharing His busy life; and in all this, she became His generous helper, first among that band of healed and grateful women who ministered to Him out of their means.

When Jesus was lifted up in crucifixion, Mary remained the sharer of His shame. Those 11 disciples of Jesus who boasted about their loyalty to their Master Jesus and argued about who was supposed to be the top dog for Jesus could not be found. All but one hightailed out by the time of the crucifixion of their Master. The main spokesman of the disciples, Peter even denied any knowledge of Jesus, not just once, but 3 times. But this Mary Magdalene had never argued with anyone for her position, nor had she boasted about her love for the Savior and Master.

We find Mary Magdalene first watching from a distance and then drawing near to the foot of the cross. She could not die on the cross with Jesus, but she stood as near to Him as she could, and when His blessed body was taken down, she watched to see how and where it was laid.

She was the faithful and watchful believer, last at the grave where Jesus was buried. First at the grave where He arose. Her loyalty and love made her a favored behold-

er of her beloved Master, who called her by her name with so much love and to make her His messenger of Good News to the fearful disciples and Peter. Grace found her useless and made her useful, cast out her demons and gave her to behold angels, delivered her from satan and united her forever to the Lord Jesus. May we all respond to God's grace like Mary Magdalene with such devotion and love.

F. APPLICATIONS

- 1) The closer we draw near to our Savior and Lord Jesus through His Word and prayers to Him, the more blessed we are to be in God's grace.**
- 2) Sin will always be present with us in this life, but its influence over us will be lessened over time in the process of sanctification in God's grace.**
- 3) Conformity to Christ's image is the process of sanctification in God's grace.**