

BASIC CHRISTIAN FAITH AND PRACTICE 9: GROWING IN HOLINESS

Introduction: One of the primary calls on God's people is to be holy (1 Pet 1:13-16). It is not an optional part of the Christian life, but necessary, flowing directly out of the nature of our salvation and our submission to the Lord. In this study, we will look at what holiness is and how to grow in it, "perfecting holiness in the fear of God" as Paul puts it in 2 Cor 7:1 (NASB).

I. What Is Holiness?

A. Holiness at its core means to be set apart. It is set-apartness.

1. How does that relate to God? Is he set apart? And if so, how is he set apart? → God is the absolute holiest. He is set apart from all else as the only non-contingent being, the Creator, supreme and perfect in every way.
2. Holiness for us has to do with being set apart for God and his purposes and service. In the OT, the objects in the Temple (pots, pans, bowls, etc.) were "set apart" from other ordinary pots, bowls, etc. They were only to be used for the sacrifices and rituals of the Temple. They were holy. Similarly, God called Israel to be holy, i.e., to set themselves apart for his purposes and service and obedience to him, and to act accordingly.
3. Holiness can also refer to godliness/Christlikeness. Why would that be, given what we have said so far? → God is the ultimate holy one and the standard of holiness, and so holiness can be thought of as likeness to him and can be measured against that standard. Moreover, if you are set apart for him and his purposes, then that calls for obeying him and acting according to his will. And so the more you do that, the more like him you become and the more holy you become in a sense, the more set apart you are to him and his purposes, service, and will.
4. So does that mean that there can be degrees of holiness? → Yes, in the sense of godliness.
5. What do the terms "sanctify" and "sanctification" refer to? → "Sanctify" is a biblical word that simply means "to set apart or make holy." "Sanctification" refers to the process of setting apart or making holy. It is the term theologians use for the process of the believer growing in Christ/Christlikeness/godliness/holiness, etc.

B. There is a conflict in our lives which consists of the following:

1. We are new and perfect in Christ (2 Corinthians 5:15-17, 21)
2. We continue to sin (Romans 7:15, 19, 22-23)
3. How do we reconcile these two? → A quick study in theology will help us.
 - a. What is justification? → God's declaration that the one who believes in Christ is righteous. By faith in Jesus, we are clothed with his righteousness and thus stand forgiven and clean and accepted before the Lord. This is our position/status.
 - b. What is glorification? → Our ultimate destiny. When Jesus returns, we will be perfected, totally transformed into the image of Christ, our sinful nature removed, and we will receive resurrected bodies like his. This will be the culmination of Christ's saving work – the total redemption of our persons. Our sanctification will be complete.

- c. And what is sanctification again? → It is the process in this life between justification and glorification in which God makes us increasingly more like Jesus, making our practical condition (imperfect and struggling with sin) more and more like our position in Christ (sinless and perfect in Christ).

C. The already and the not yet

During World War II a turning point came that decided the outcome of the whole rest of the war. On June 6, 1944 the Allied forces invaded the Normandy coast. That is known as D-Day. If the Germans had been able to repel that attack, the war would have taken a very different turn. As it was, the Allies gained the beachhead and began an offensive push into occupied France. Everyone on both sides knew that, with the success of D-Day, the outcome of an Allied victory was assured and only a matter of time. Nonetheless there were still months of fighting before the Nazis surrendered.

This is how it is with us. The cross marks the D-Day of God's plan of salvation (the Already). Satan knows he's lost, but he keeps fighting, trying to take as many with him in his destruction as he can. Sanctification (growth in holiness) is that march across Europe. It is the battle-by-battle fight in the light of ultimate victory. Our hope is in the unshakeable victory of Jesus. V-Day (Victory Day) is the Not Yet, that day when Jesus returns and we will enter into the fullness of the victory he has won, when all things will be made new, and we will be perfected/glorified. That day will surely come. It is important for us to fight the battle of sanctification knowing that victory is assured if we persevere.

II. How can we grow in holiness? → A lot of the basics of the Christian life, including ones we have already covered, come into play here. But let's go over how to grow in Christ and we can recall points we have gone over when appropriate, and we can zero in on going deeper with some of them and on covering some things we have not yet discussed.

A. The word of God (John 17:17). How does the word of God sanctify us?

1. God uses his truth/word to sanctify us. How? → See 2 immediately below.
2. As we trust in God's word and obey it, as we increasingly conform to it, we become more holy in practice. The more we trust in God's word and truth, think in accord with God's word, obey God's word, conform to God's word, know him more through his word, and become more practically holy, then the more we become like him.
3. The fight of faith. What is that? (We talked about it in our study of overcoming the Devil). → Identifying lies and temptations and countering or replacing them with God's truth. We claim God's truth and promises. We can also claim God's truth for power to do anything we do.

B. Prayer. How does this grow us in the Lord? → It brings us to know God better and it lays hold of God's power for overcoming sin and growing in the Lord.

C. The filling of the Holy Spirit and walking in him. What is that about? → Confessing any sin we might have, submitting ourselves to God, and trusting the Holy Spirit to direct and empower us.

D. Community. How does that help us to grow in Christ? → It gives us a God-ordained environment that is dedicated to growing us in Christ. Just about every aspect of community serves this purpose.

1. Such as? → The word, prayer, experience of God's presence, worship, Communion, encouragement, love, iron sharpening iron, service, accountability, etc., etc.

2. Live in the Light. In your church family, bring your sins out in the open where they cannot survive.
3. Regarding accountability, beyond the general accountability we provide one another through normal relating to one another as believers, it can be beneficial to get specific accountability for overcoming specific sins like having your brother in Christ ask you about it regularly and pray for you.

E. Our identity in Christ

1. Those who believe in Jesus Christ are “in Christ.” 1 Cor 1:30; Eph 1:13-14

- What does it mean to be in Christ? → It refers to being in union with him. We share in his history, identity, inheritance, and destiny. Generally, what is true of him becomes true of us.
 - Illustrations: Think about how an unborn baby is in his mother. Generally, the baby shares in what is true of the mother and what is true of the mother is true of her baby. Where the mother goes, the baby goes because the baby is in her. What happens to the mother, in a sense, happens to the baby. If rain falls on the mother, it is falling on the baby too in a sense. If the mother eats, the nutrients of the food go to the baby too. Or think of being in a car. If you are in a car, if the car goes 55 miles an hour, so do you. If it rains on the car, it rains on you in a sense. You share in the environment inside the car.

2. What are some things that are true of us in Christ? (The list below is just a sampling.)

- a. We are righteous (Rom 3:22-24; 2 Cor 5:21) and justified (i.e., declared righteous) by God (Gal 2:15-17 (note the reference to being justified *in Christ*)).
- b. We are children of God (Gal 3:26).
- c. We are heirs of God’s promises/blessings (Rom 8:16-17).
- d. We are chosen by God; we belong to him as his family/people (Col 3:12).
- e. We are holy (Col 3:12).
- f. We are beloved (Col 3:12).
- g. We are new creations with a godly nature provided by the Holy Spirit (2 Cor 5:17; Eph 4:24).

3. We can grow in Christ by knowing our identity in Christ and claiming and identifying with our New Self and Spirit-given desires rather than with our flesh/sinful nature. We talked about this a good deal in the study on the Flesh. But here, we add to our understanding of our identity in Christ. In addition to identifying with our godly nature and its desires, we can also identify with and claim various other aspects of our identity in Christ, such as the list above. “As someone who is righteous in God’s sight, who is a child of God, etc., I will resist this temptation or think this way or do that godly action,” etc.

a. Meditating on the amazing blessings of our identity in Christ will grow us in love for Jesus

1. What does love for Jesus lead us to do according to John 14:15, 23? → Obey his commandments
2. How does growth in love for Jesus relate to sanctification? → It is growth in Christ + in holiness itself, as is obedience. So it also grows us in Christ and holiness because it leads to obedience.

b. Beware sanctification by trying harder! The biblical path is sanctification by faith.

-- What's the difference? → Relying on our own strength and will-power vs. relying on God's word and the Holy Spirit.

4. Romans 6:5-14

a. What does this passage say about our relationship to sin as believers? → We are dead to sin+alive to God through union with Christ by faith in his death and resurrection. We are no longer slaves to sin. It's power over us has been broken. We do not have to sin.

b. What does v. 11 call us to do? → To regard ourselves as dead to sin but alive to God, which is a way of calling us to trust in this truth and claim it.

-- What does doing this lead to? → See vv. 12-14 and note the "therefore" starting v. 12. It leads to refraining from sin and overcoming it, and to practicing righteousness. Leads to holiness.

F. Ephesians 4:17-24 – A Basic Biblical Pattern of Sanctification

1. What do vv 17-19 speak of? → Sinful, ungodly thinking and living.

-- How does that relate to the following verses? Why write vv. 17-19 immediately before vv 20-24?
→ Provides a contrast to the call of vv 20-24. Don't be like vv 17-19, but be like vv 20-24 instead.

2. What do verses 20-21 tell us about what the following verses (22-24) are about? → It is what they were taught in Christ from the beginning. They are about the true, right way of thinking about God and all reality, and the right way of living. All of this is in Jesus. The truth is in Jesus.

3. They were taught 3 basic things. What are they (vv 22-24)? → Put off old self, be renewed in the spirit or attitude of their mind, and put on the new self.

4. Put off your old self (v 22)? → Put off your sinful nature with its sinful practices and desires. Actively renounce that and choose to refrain from embracing those sinful desires or carrying them out.

a. Literally, "lusts of deceit?" → Sinful desires produced by falsehood. Sin and sinful desire come from unbelief or belief in falsehood. (Could also be translated as "deceitful desires," and refer to our sinful desires deceiving us to sin as what will be best for us and satisfying.)

b. Such false belief and desires it produces corrupt us, lead us to sin, etc.

c. When does this putting off of our Old Self happen? → Fundamentally, when we became Christians, but it is something we have to continue living in accordance with. So we continue to put off our old self in a sense as we resist our sinful nature and live contrary to it.

5. Be renewed in the attitude of your mind (v 23).

a. The word for "attitude" here is more literally "spirit," but the word can mean "attitude" and seems to here since it talks of the spirit of the mind. We have the same sort of usage in English, like if we talk about being in high spirits or the spirit of the age we live in.

b. So what attitude of mind is being called for? → Faith in the truth rather than faith in falsehood. Embracing what God says rather than what the World, the Flesh, and the Devil say. It is coming

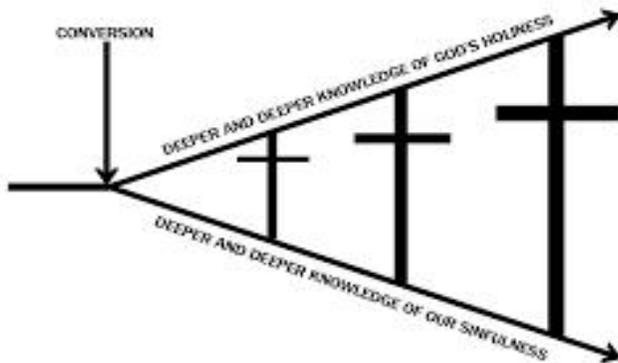
to think rightly about God and reality, trusting his truth, etc. We are renewed as we not only understand God's truth and attitude, but adopt it as our own in humble faith

- c. This goes along with the fight of faith we have talked about. As we go along in the Christian life, we want to bring every thought to obedience to Christ. We want to measure all things by the word of God and trust in God's truth and viewpoint, rejecting every other claim and viewpoint.
 - d. As we face sin in our lives, identify the lie or lies that the sin is based on, and counter/replace it with God's truth. Reject the lies and claim God's truth and act based on God's truth.
 - e. This is presented here as an ongoing process.
6. Put on the new self (v 24)? → Put on our new godly nature with its practices and desires, embracing the desires and character of Christ, given to us by the Holy Spirit living in us, and acting accordingly.
- a. What is said about our new self here? → Like God; godly; righteous; holy
 - b. Literally, "righteousness and holiness of the truth" (some translations: true righteousness + holiness)
-- What might that suggest?
 1. Righteousness and holiness come from the truth. They are based in the truth of God/Jesus, who he is, etc.
 2. While our new nature is already righteous and holy, growth in righteousness and holiness for each of us a whole person comes by believing the truth, i.e., being renewed in the spirit of your mind by faith.
 3. We can grow in holiness by claiming the truth of who we already are, believing it and therefore living accordingly.
7. Putting it all together: (1) Be renewed in the attitude of your mind by identifying lies and countering/replacing them with God's truth contained in his word. (2) Put off sin and sinful desires. (3) Put on righteousness and godly desires.
8. An example from the context: Ephesians 4:25: Put off lying and put on telling the truth based on the mind-renewing truth that we are members of one body.
9. It is critical to not just put off sin, but also to put on the righteousness that replaces it with trust in God's truth. Why? → Because just stopping doing something normally leaves a whole of sorts, and we are likely to end up back in the same sin if we do not replace that sin with positive action.

Conclusion to Part 1: In this study, we have seen that holiness is a fundamental call for Christians that has to do with being set apart for God and his purposes and service, and being like him. As believers, who have two natures within us, a sinful nature and a godly nature, we are in the process of sanctification, which is the process of being made more like Jesus. And we have talked about a number of ways by which we can grow in Christ, including the word of God, prayer, walking in the Spirit, claiming our identity in Christ, and the putting off sin, being renewed in the attitude of our minds, and putting on righteousness. In the next study, we will look at more ways by which we can grow in Christ and holiness/sanctification.

Introduction to Part 2: Last study, we began looking at growing in holiness. What did we say about it and how we can grow in it? → We saw that holiness is a fundamental call for Christians that has to do with being set apart for God and his purposes and service, and being like him. As believers, who have two natures within us, a sinful nature and a godly nature, we are in the process of sanctification, which is the process of being made more like Jesus. We have talked about a number of ways by which we can grow in Christ, including the word of God, prayer, walking in the Spirit, claiming our identity in Christ, and putting off sin, being renewed in the attitude of our minds, and putting on righteousness. In this study, we will complete our focused discussion of growing in holiness, although just about everything we go over in this Basics course relates to growing in holiness and is useful towards that end. We are picking it up with further ways to grow in holiness.

G. The gospel¹



The starting point of the Christian life (conversion) comes when I first become aware of the gap between God's holiness and my sinfulness. When I am converted, I trust and hope in Jesus, who has done what I could never do: he has bridged the gap between my sinfulness and God's holiness. He has taken God's holy wrath toward my sin upon himself.

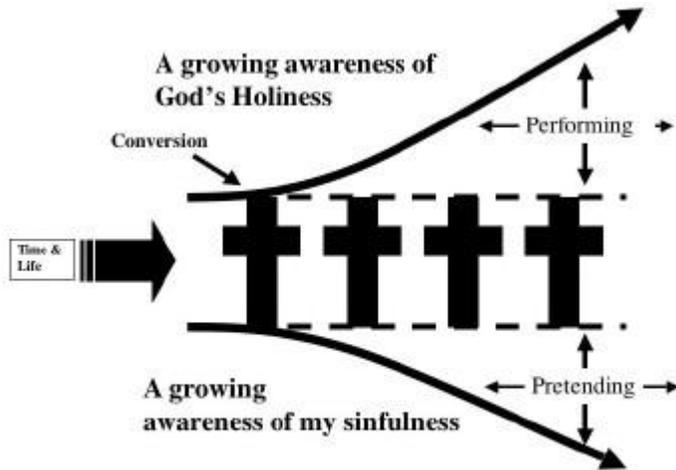
At the point of conversion, however, I have a very limited view of God's holiness and of my sin. The more I grow in my Christian life, the more I grow in my awareness of God's holiness and of my flesh and sinfulness. As I read the Bible, experience the Holy Spirit's conviction, and live in community with other people, the extent of God's greatness and the extent of my sin become increasingly clear and vivid. It is not that God is becoming more holy or that I am becoming more sinful. But my awareness of both is growing. I am increasingly seeing God as he actually is and myself as I actually am in my flesh. And so, ironically, some believers can actually fail to see their growth in the Lord or even think or feel they are doing worse in practical holiness when they are indeed becoming more like Jesus and growing in practical holiness.

As my understanding of my sin and of God's holiness grows, something else also grows: my appreciation and love for Jesus. His mediation, his sacrifice, his righteousness, and his gracious work on my behalf become increasingly sweet and powerful to me. The cross looms larger and more central in my life as I rejoice in the Savior who died upon it.

1. How does growth in love for Jesus relate to sanctification (we talked about this in our last study)?
→ It is itself growth in sanctification/holiness, and it leads to obedience (John 14:15). And growth in obedience is also growth in practical holiness.

¹ Much of the material in point G on the gospel is adapted from Robert H. Thune and Will Walker, *The Gospel-Centered Life: Study Guide with Leader's Notes*, 12-14.

Because of the indwelling sin that remains in us, we have an ongoing tendency to minimize the gospel or “shrink the cross.” This happens when we either (a) minimize God’s perfect holiness, thinking of him as something less than his word declares him to be, or (b) elevate my own righteousness, thinking of myself as someone better than I actually am. The cross becomes smaller and Christ’s importance in my life is diminished. There is a temptation to add things to the cross/gospel to fill the gap left between us and God, such as performing or good works, pretending my own righteousness is enough or that God’s standards are less than they are.



SHRINKING THE CROSS

Growing in the gospel means seeing more of God’s holiness and more of my sin. And because of what Jesus has done for us on the cross, we need not fear seeing God as he really is or facing the worst things about ourselves and admitting how broken we really are. Our hope is not in our own goodness, nor in the vain expectation that God will compromise his standards and “grade on a curve.” Rather, we rest in Jesus as our perfect Redeemer—the One who is “our righteousness, holiness, and redemption” (1 Cor. 1:30).

2. 2 Peter 1:5-9

- a. How do the qualities mentioned in vv. 5-7 relate to sanctification? → Growing in these is a way of describing sanctification. Growing in them is growing in Jesus and in practical holiness.
- b. What does v 9 suggest is key to growing in them, and therefore, in Christ/holiness? → Remembering that we have been cleansed from our past sins. I.e., remembering the gospel.

H. Repentance (This goes hand in hand with the gospel as a method of sanctification.)

1. What should our attitude towards sin be? → Sin is antithetical to God. God hates sin, and so should we. We should never tolerate sin in our lives. We should never be comfortable with it or give it any room in our behavior. If we see sin, we should deal with it immediately.
2. Beware condemnation.
 - a. What does the Bible tell us about condemnation for Christians? → Romans 8:1
 - b. What is the difference between conviction and condemnation? → Conviction is the Holy Spirit showing us that we have sinned and need to repent. This might make us feel bad or guilty for the sin, but it leads us to repentance. Condemnation brings about feeling bad or guilty without hope or as reflective of your identity or permanent status. Thoughts or feelings such as, “You have done wrong and need to make it right with God,” is typical of conviction by the Holy Spirit.

Thoughts+feelings of just feeling bad about yourself or such as, “God doesn’t love you,” “there’s no forgiveness this time,” “you’re horrible and hopeless,” are not from the Lord but Satan.

3. How should we deal with sin? → Repentance

a. What is repentance? → To change one’s mind accompanied by a corresponding change in attitude and behavior. It is to turn 180 degrees. We were going one way, and now we turn and go the opposite way (God’s way). When it concerns a specific sin, we turn away from the sin and we turn to God and doing his will in that situation. We purpose to never commit that sin again.

b. We have talked about repentance multiple times already in this course, but now we want to highlight it as one of the greatest tools we have in the process of sanctification. We actually grow in our relationship with the Lord and overcome sin through repentance.

c. 1 John 1:8-2:2

1. What principle does v 8 give us that can be applied to repentance? → Be honest and acknowledge sin. Don’t hide it or minimize it.

2. When you realize you have sinned, confess it to God and get right with him. Purpose to never do it again. That does not mean you won’t do it again but is about the intent of your heart.

3. Receive God’s love and forgiveness. Know that you are forgiven and cleansed from all unrighteousness based on the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ’s death for us. Preach the gospel to yourself!

4. If appropriate, ask forgiveness from anyone you wronged and make restitution to them.

d. But what if you keep committing the same sin over and over again? → Keep repenting over and over again! Perseverance is a sanctification strategy. Not all battles are won overnight. But keep fighting. You will win the war. As you continue to repent, you will mature spiritually over time.

4. Cultivate a lifestyle of repentance. That involves being quick to repent whenever we sin.

I. What method of sanctification does 2 Cor 3:18 reveal? → Beholding/contemplating the glory of the Lord

1. The Greek word for “behold” or “contemplate” here can also mean to “reflect.” But “to behold” is more likely for multiple reasons, including that Paul is alluding to Exodus 34 and Moses seeing the glory of the Lord and being in the presence of the Lord unveiled and then reflecting that glory.

2. What is the glory of the Lord here? → God as he is; his character; his beauty; his presence

3. What is this verse saying? → As we look at or contemplate God, his character, his works, his beauty, experience his presence, we are increasingly transformed into his image by the Holy Spirit. He grows us in likeness to him. He increasingly sanctifies us/makes us more holy.

4. How can we behold or contemplate the glory of the Lord? → Reading or studying the word; thinking about or meditating on him; prayer; being in and attending to his presence; worship

5. What significance might there be to Paul presenting this as something “we all” do together? → That this especially takes place in community when we are gathered together. It certainly applies to us

beholding the glory of the Lord individually in our own lives, but this especially happens as we are gathered together before the Lord to behold him and contemplate him.

-- This undergirds our worship at FCC. We gather in the presence of the Lord to behold, contemplate, and worship him.

6. What can we know as we sincerely do these things by which we can behold the Lord and contemplate him? → We can trust that the Holy Spirit is using them to transform us into the image of Christ, that he is sanctifying us and making us more practically holy.

J. Faith in future grace

1. 1 Peter 1:13-16

- a. What motivations to holiness are given in these verses? → Our identity as children of God; God's own holiness and his command to be holy; and the one we are focusing on now: the future grace God has in store for us when Jesus Christ returns
- b. What do you think that grace is? → The fullness and completion of salvation; standing righteous in the final judgment; glorification; total transformation into the image of Christ; the full and direct presence of God forever; heaven, etc.
- c. How does that motivate us to holiness? → Because it is the greatest thing, our great hope, better than all else; we want it! And holiness is the path of those who are headed toward that grace. Cf. Jesus's exhortation to store up treasure in heaven (Mt 6:20).

2. 2 Corinthians 7:1

- a. What is the "therefore" there for? What is the call to holiness here rooted in? → The promises of God quoted in 1 Cor 6:16-18.
- b. Trust in God's promises is inherently future oriented, even if the future in view is the next moment. As we trust in God's promises, we rely on his grace to arrive every moment as we move into the future.
- c. So what strategy for growing in holiness does suggest? → This again points us back to the word of God and its promises. Knowing them, memorizing them, claiming them, and living by them and looking to God's grace to sustain us and empower us moment by moment.

3. 2 Corinthians 9:8

Conclusion

God has called us as his children to a life of holiness and to the process of sanctification as we walk with him on the way to Heaven and glorification. As we have looked at growing in holiness, we have talked about a number of ways by which we can grow in holiness: the word of God, prayer, the filling of the Holy Spirit and walking in him, community, claiming our identity in Christ, putting off sin, being renewed in the attitude of our minds, and putting on righteousness, the gospel, repentance, contemplating the glory of the Lord, and faith in future grace. But if we were to try boil this all down as simply as possible, we can say that we grow in holiness by faith, by trusting in the Lord and his word.