

# **“GOSPEL” MEANS “GOOD NEWS”**

## **A Four-Part Seminar on Reformed Theology**

### *SESSION 4: THE CHRISTIAN LIFE*

#### **How Do Christians Grow?**

#### **I. Understanding the Question**

- A. The question “How do Christians grow?” has to do with the nature, context, and means of a Christian’s growth in holiness
- B. In Christian theology, this is the doctrine of sanctification

**1 Thessalonians 4:3–5, 7 For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from sexual immorality; that each one of you know how to control his own body in holiness and honor, not in the passion of lust like the Gentiles who do not know God... For God has not called us for impurity, but in holiness.**

- C. Related questions:

- 1. What is the power source for living the Christian life?
- 2. How does Christ lead, feed and protect his sheep?

#### **II. The Nature of Christian Growth**

- A. While justification has to do with being *declared* righteous by God, sanctification has to do with being *made* more and more righteous in our conduct and character
- B. The fact that we are saved by grace alone through faith alone does not mean that we are free to go on sinning after we have placed our trust in Christ

**Romans 6:1–4, 7, 11-14 What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it? Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised**

from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life... For one who has died has been set free from sin... So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus. Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body, to make you obey its passions. Do not present your members to sin as instruments for unrighteousness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and your members to God as instruments for righteousness. For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace.

1. The gospel not only saves us from the guilt of sin, but also saves us from the enslaving power of sin
2. While all Christians continue to struggle with indwelling sin for as long as we live, our lives are not to be characterized by the practice of sin but by the practice of righteousness

**Galatians 5:17** For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do.

**1 John 3:9** No one born of God makes a practice of sinning, for God's seed abides in him, and he cannot keep on sinning because he has been born of God.

- C. Sanctification is not accomplished by the law or by fear of punishment but by believing God when he says that we are no longer slaves to sin

1. It is God's *grace* that trains us to live godly lives

**Titus 2:11–12** For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age

2. “We do not actually receive any sufficient strength to encourage our hearts to holiness in all difficulties, until we can steadfastly believe that God is with us, and will not forsake us... If we would live to God, not ourselves, but by Christ living in us, according to Paul’s example, we must be able to assure ourselves, as he did, ‘Christ loved me and gave himself for me’ (Gal. 2:20)”<sup>1</sup>
3. “It is imperative that we realize our complete dependence upon the Holy Spirit. We must not forget, of course, that our activity is enlisted to the fullest extent in the process of sanctification. But we must not rely upon our own strength of resolution or purpose. It is when we are weak that we are strong. It is by grace that we are being saved as surely as by grace we have been saved.”<sup>2</sup>
4. While sanctification is God’s work in us, it simultaneously requires that we live in light of the new life we have been given in Christ

**Philippians 2:12–13 Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.**

### III. The Context of Christian Growth

#### A. Church membership

1. Being a Christian involves being under the shepherding authority of a local church
2. Active church membership is an important aspect of Christian discipleship because Jesus established the church’s

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<sup>1</sup> Walter Marshall, *The Gospel-Mystery of Sanctification*, 128, 129.

<sup>2</sup> John Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied*, 147.

ministry as the means by which he builds up and cares for his church

**Acts 20:17-18, 28** [Paul] sent to Ephesus and called the elders of the church to come to him. And when they came to him, he said to them... "Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood."

3. Many New Testament commands assume that Christians will be members of a local church

**1 Thessalonians 5:12–13** We ask you, brothers, to respect those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, and to esteem them very highly in love because of their work.

**Hebrews 13:17** Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you.

#### B. Public worship on the Lord's Day

1. In worship, God graciously draws us into his saving presence to build us up in faith through his appointed means
2. The Scriptures command Christians to regularly attend public worship

**Colossians 3:16** Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God.

**Hebrews 10:25** not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.

3. “The church’s worship and fellowship are ends in themselves. Nothing that we do in this world is more important than participating in these activities...If the life of the world-to-come defines who we really and truly are, then the earthly community that opens the gates to this kingdom and bestows its fellowship upon us has pride of place over those that do not.”<sup>3</sup>

#### IV. The Means of Christian Growth

- A. “Means of grace” = the things that God ordinarily uses to create, nourish, and sustain faith in Christ
- B. Scripture (also see the outline for Session 2)

**Romans 10:14, 17 And how are they to hear without someone preaching?... So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.**

**1 Thessalonians 2:13 And we also thank God constantly for this, that when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God, which is at work in you believers.**

- C. Sacraments

1. Baptism is the sign that marks us out as members of Christ and his covenant people

**Matthew 28:18–20 All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.**

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<sup>3</sup> David VanDrunen, *Living in Christ’s Two Kingdoms*, 133.

2. The Lord's Supper is the sign that testifies to our ongoing union with Christ and the spiritual nourishment and life that we derive from him

**1 Corinthians 10:16 The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ?**

3. "Why then is the sacrament appointed? Not that you may get any new thing, but that you may get the same thing better than you had it in the Word. The sacrament is appointed that we may get a better hold of Christ than we got in the simple Word... The sacraments... serve to seal and confirm the truth that is in the Word... Although you believed the evidence before, yet by the seals, you believe it better... for the more the outward senses are awakened, the more is the inward heart and mind persuaded to believe... The Word is appointed to work belief, and the sacrament is appointed to confirm you in this belief."<sup>4</sup>

#### D. Prayer

**Ephesians 6:10, 18-20 Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might..., praying at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert with all perseverance, making supplication for all the saints, and also for me, that words may be given to me in opening my mouth boldly to proclaim the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains, that I may declare it boldly, as I ought to speak.**

1. We need to pray because we are utterly dependent upon God for everything
2. "It is...by the benefit of prayer that we reach those riches which are laid up for us with the Heavenly Father... Nothing is promised to be expected from the Lord, which we

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<sup>4</sup> Robert Bruce, *The Mystery of the Lord's Supper*, 64-5.

are not also bidden to ask of him in prayers... It is by prayer that we call him to reveal himself as wholly present to us.”<sup>5</sup>

## V. Conclusion

- A. Only Jesus has “life in himself” (Jn. 5:26); apart from him, we have no life and are unable to produce the fruit of holiness (see Jn. 15:5)
- B. The Christian remains dependent upon the gospel for all his days

**Galatians 3:1–3 O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? It was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified. Let me ask you only this: Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law or by hearing with faith? Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?**

- C. “We glide out of our harbor under full sail, thrilled with delight in knowing our sins are forgiven and that we are right with God. A new love for our Redeemer fills us with gratitude, and we are eager to follow the course he has set for us in his Word. Yet as we pass into the open seas, we encounter spiritual stress... Our whole life as Christians is a process of sailing confidently into the open seas, dying down in exhaustion, and having our sails filled again with God’s precious promises... No less than when we first believed, we must always attribute to the gospel the power that fills our sails with gratitude, and to the law the proper course that such gratitude takes. At the beginning, in the middle, and at the end, the gospel ‘is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes.’ (Rom. 1:16).”<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 3.20.1ff.

<sup>6</sup> Michael Horton, *God of Promise*, 193, 194.