

## **Grace-Driven Effort, Part 2**

January 5<sup>th</sup>, 2014

Romans 5-8

*"<sup>11</sup>So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus. <sup>12</sup>Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body, to make you obey its passions. <sup>13</sup>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. <sup>14</sup>For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace."*

Last Sunday we looked at this idea of, in the words of Don Carson, "grace-driven effort". From 2 Peter 1:1ff, we saw:

1. No one just slides or stumbles or drifts into a life of holiness, but we must strive and pursue and fight and run and work and be diligent and make every effort to grow into the image of Jesus.
2. Without such a vigilant pursuit, there's no eternal salvation. Those who have been chosen and called by God confirm their calling and election by their diligence to progressively be conformed to the image of Jesus, and practically becoming holy.
3. This pursuit – rather than being scary – is actually very secure, because Almighty power is granted to us, so that the strenuous effort we expend in sanctification is actually the strenuous effort of the upholder of the universe. In all your working, God is working and willing in you, so tremble (with joy and wonder)!
4. This grace comes through knowledge. There is no experience of grace and spiritual power by which we might make effort to grow in the likeness of Jesus without knowledge of Him and His promises.

Now today I want to dig a bit deeper into this idea, especially the pursuit of the knowledge of God. And to do that, I'd like you to turn to Romans 5, but to illustrate one of my desires for this message, I will not turn there myself, but share from my heart with you.

## **A Plea for Major Bible Memorization**

I've recited these chapters for you – knowing the risk of pride in my own heart and unwarranted admiration in yours – because I believe the rewards of doing it are worth the risks. And that reward is to stir you up by way of example (see Philippians 4:9) to love the Scriptures, and specifically to express that love of Scripture by committing verses and paragraphs and chapters and maybe even entire books to memory in 2014, and beyond. In the limited time I have left, before we go to the Lord's table together, let me walk you through some lessons I've learned from these chapters about God's grace and our effort in the process of sanctification.

### **1. Sanctification<sup>1</sup>, which is the way to eternal life, is the gift of God**

*"<sup>17</sup>But thanks be to God, that you who were once slaves of sin have become obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching to which you were committed, <sup>18</sup>and, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness."*

Romans 6:17-18

What is he thanking God for? For their heartfelt obedience to the apostles' teaching. And He's thanking *God*, because God did it. Their obedience is God's gift. He is inclining their hearts to do His will. They are acting in accord with what they want, but that they want holiness and obedience is due to God's work.

*"<sup>22</sup>But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God (the verbs are passive, meaning it's being done to us), the fruit you get leads to sanctification (or, holiness, Hebrews 12:14) and its end, eternal life (so*

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<sup>1</sup> "Sanctification is the biblical teaching that we are progressively conformed to the image of Christ in our attitudes and words and actions by the power of the Holy Spirit moving through faith to make us become daily in practice what we have already become in Christ." John Piper, *Think*, p.69.

sanctification is the path leads to eternal life; eternal life is the outcome or destination of sanctification). <sup>23</sup>*For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.*" Romans 6:22-23

All this – the eternal life, and the way to it, sanctification – is the free gift of God. That is what verses 17ff told us.

## **2. Nevertheless, we are called to action in this process of sanctification**

<sup>12</sup>*Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body, to make you obey its passions.*

<sup>13</sup>*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.*" Romans 6:12-13

<sup>19</sup>*For just as you once presented your members as slaves to impurity and to lawlessness leading to more lawlessness, so now present your members as slaves to righteousness leading to sanctification.*" Romans 6:19

<sup>13</sup>*For if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live.*" Romans 8:13

So God is the decisive, all-powerful Doer in this work, but you are not passive. Your choices and your effort and your actions really matter, and without them, sanctification will not happen. Putting these two points together, we see that sanctification is God's gift to us ("Thanks be to God..."), yet there is really human action and willing and choosing that is involved in this process. I choose not to let sin reign in my body, *because* God is at work in me and will not let sin reign in my body. This is grace-driven effort!

Don't hear all this and conclude that the battle is a charade, and nothing hangs on your choices. Don't come to the Bible with the assumption: if it does not depend on what I choose ultimately, it does not depend on what I choose at all. That is man-centered, unbiblical thinking. It's not how Paul taught, or lived (1 Corinthians 15:10). So, say with him, "Since it depends on God ultimately, there is hope that I, a dead and hardened sinner, can choose what is good and live a life pleasing to

God. Don't let the sovereignty of God paralyze you, but let it liberate you with the hope that change is possible!

### **3. The main focus of our work in sanctification is mind work**

Did you notice how many times the idea of “knowing”, “considering”, “setting the mind”, “being sure”, shows up in these chapters?

*"<sup>3</sup>Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?" Romans 6:3; cf. 6:16, 7:1*

*"<sup>6</sup>We know that our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin." Romans 6:6*

*"<sup>9</sup>We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him." Romans 6:9*

*"<sup>3</sup>More than that, we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance," Romans 5:3*

*"<sup>22</sup>For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now." Romans 8:22*

*"<sup>28</sup>And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose." Romans 8:28*

*"<sup>11</sup>So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus." Romans 6:11*

*"<sup>18</sup>For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us." Romans 8:18*

*"<sup>38</sup>For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers," Romans 8:38*

*"<sup>2</sup>Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind..." Romans 12:2*

*"<sup>1</sup>If then you have been raised with Christ...set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth...<sup>9</sup>Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices <sup>10</sup>and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator." Colossians 3:1, 9-10*

*"<sup>8</sup>Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things..."*

Philippians 4:8

*"<sup>4</sup>For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds. <sup>5</sup>We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ," 2*

Corinthians 10:4-5

*"<sup>13</sup>Therefore, preparing your minds for action, and being sober-minded, set your hope fully on the grace that will be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ. <sup>14</sup>As obedient children, do not be conformed to the passions of your former ignorance, <sup>15</sup>but as he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, <sup>16</sup>since it is written, "You shall be holy, for I am holy."'" 1 Peter 1:14-16*

*"<sup>21</sup>But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope: <sup>22</sup>The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; <sup>23</sup>they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness." Lamentations 3:21-23*

*"<sup>3</sup>You keep him in perfect peace whose mind is stayed on you, because he trusts in you." Isaiah 26:3*

*"<sup>6</sup>My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge..." Hosea 4:6*

These Scriptures imply that the mind is a muscle, and you can (and are commanded to) take it from one thing and set it on another thing. We are often so lazy and passive in this regard! Hold this thought on heavenly things, on the things of the Spirit. You're in a war (2 Cor. 10:5), don't do this for thirty seconds and tell me it didn't work!

And don't tell me that "you're just not a deep thinker like you, Larry". We all do have different capacities, but this simply isn't true. There's not a person in this room who is unable to set their minds on something and consider and reflect and ponder and meditate with all their might, to the point that it changes you. You do it all the time.

What is worry, but setting the mind on a troubling, frightening, uncertain situation? You play it over and over in our minds and you ponder the worst possible outcome to that problem, and you've got

worry! Or anger: someone does something that gets under your skin, and instead of just letting it go, you ponder this bad thing to the point that you are infuriated in your heart.

Transformation into the image of Jesus requires more than knowledge. Knowledge can be fruitless, puff up, etc. Renewal of the mind is God's gift (the Holy Spirit takes the knowledge and reveals it as true, precious, powerful and glorious, Titus 3:3), but there is no real faith or renewal apart from knowledge, because the heart and the will are changed as something (or Someone) is presented to the understanding (2 Corinthians 4:4-6), and then seen as beautiful.

#### **4.This mind renewal (i.e., in knowledge) comes mainly from contact with the words of God (i.e., the Bible)**

*"<sup>5</sup>For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on **the things of the Spirit...**"* Romans 8:5

What are "the things of the Spirit"?

*"<sup>12</sup>Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might understand the things freely given us by God. <sup>13</sup>And we impart this in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual truths to those who are spiritual. <sup>14</sup>The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned."* 1 Corinthians 2:12-14

Here, "the things of the Spirit" are the words of God, the inspired teachings, spoken by the apostles. So when Romans 8:6 says that "those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit," I think he means that they set their minds on the words of God and the realities they stand for. These are the "things of the Spirit" that the natural person rejects and the spiritual person embraces. The Word of God is the water by which we are washed (Ephesians 5:26), the sword by which we attack the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places (Ephesians 6:17), the tool kit with which by which we

are equipped for every good work (2 Timothy 3:16-17), the pure milk by which we grow in our salvation (1 Peter 2:1).

So set your mind on the things of the Spirit, kill your sin by the Spirit, that is, pursue and receive and embrace the Word of God with your mind. Surely, more than knowledge is needed; the Spirit must do His illuminating work, birthing faith in us, so that we see the information presented to us as true and beautiful and sweet and precious (Titus 3:3, 2 Corinthians 4:6). But the Spirit will not work apart from information presented about God and His character, especially what is revealed of Him in Jesus. This accords with Jesus' testimony and experience:

*"<sup>31</sup>If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, <sup>32</sup>and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." John 8:31-32*

*"<sup>17</sup>Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth." John 17:17*

*"<sup>4</sup>And Jesus answered him, "It is written..." Luke 4:4*

**5. Memorization makes contact with the Bible more consistently available so that it does its transforming work in us when we really need it, in everyday life.**

I make this step mainly from logical deduction and personal experience (though the Psalmist does say in Psalm 119:11, "I have stored up your word in my heart, that I might not sin against you," and God does command in Joshua 1:8, "This Book of the Law shall not depart from your mouth, but *you shall meditate on it day and night,*" cf. Psalm 1). Jesus didn't have a scroll of Scripture in the wilderness; He had the words in His mind. Bible memorization makes meditation possible at times when I can't be reading the Bible, and meditation is the pathway to deeper understanding, which is the way my heart and will are renewed (by the Spirit, through faith), so that I experience sanctification, and its outcome, eternal life, which is the gift of God.

How will you and I obey Romans 12:2 if we neglect to saturate our minds with the thoughts of God? And that can happen in a more

constant, enduring and enriching way when His thoughts are in my mind, because then I can commune with Him and be changed by Him in an MRI chamber, dentist's chair, behind a really bad driver, as I drift off to sleep, as I'm on my way to a meeting I'm anxious about, when the dishes need to be done. And those words not only bring blessing to me, but to others who I minister to.

So, if you're not a memorizer at all, would you consider memorizing a verse per week with us in 2014? If you've memorized single verses, would you consider memorizing some paragraphs or chapters (like Psalm 23 or Romans 8)? And if you have memorized chapters, would you consider memorizing a whole book or part of a book? Few things have had a greater impact on my walk with God than putting His Word into my mind through memorization. I don't know that anything can take its place, and I long for you to experience that same joy and fruitfulness. But be careful to remember a sixth point:

**6. God counts you righteous and showers loves upon you because of your union with Christ, which is by faith alone, not because of your progress in sanctification, memorization habits, etc.**

*"Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ." Romans 5:1*

*"For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly... God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us." Romans 5:6*

*"For as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous." Romans 5:19*

*"We know that our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin. For one who has died has been set free (lit, justified) from sin." Romans 6:6*

That is why I included Romans 5 in my memorization, and my recitation this morning. Paul does not teach us how to do battle with sin and exercise effort in sanctification until we have first learned how

Christ has done battle with sin and done what we could not do and what the law could not do. When Christ becomes our righteousness by faith, the grace of God enters us mightily, and transforms us by the renewal of the Holy Spirit, and writes the law upon our hearts, and inclines us to the Word of God, and thus we become more like Jesus in practice. It is all flowing from what Jesus has done for us, not what we do for Him.

Believing (which requires *knowing*) that because of, and in union with, Jesus, your future is gloriously secure and happy is the foundational way we experience the power of Christ now to free us from sin. So let's go to the Lord's Table and *remember* Him in His death, which is where all of the blessings of the gospel spring forth from.