Section: Doctrine of the Holy Spirit (Pneumatology)

Wednesday, December 16, 2020

Rob Barber

**TEACHING NOTES**

**Q97. What is progressive sanctification?**

Progressive sanctification is growing in holiness through obedience to the Lordship of Jesus and His word from a right heart. By grace, it is a lifelong process powered by the Holy Spirit to change us to become more like Christ.

Let’s start with a basic definition of sanctification. Webster’s 1828 Dictionary gives this definition:

**SANCTIFICA'TION**

**1.** The act of making holy. In an evangelical sense, the act of God's grace by which the affections of men are purified or alienated from sin and the world, and exalted to a supreme love to God.

God hath from the beginning chosen you to salvation, through sanctification of the Spirit and belief of the truth. ([**2 Thessalonians 2:13**](http://www.webstersdictionary1828.com/Dictionary/Sanctification). [**1 Peter 1:2**](http://www.webstersdictionary1828.com/Dictionary/Sanctification)).

**2.** The act of consecrating or of setting apart for a sacred purpose; consecration.

* **Definitive Sanctification**

So, to sanctify is to make holy or to set apart. Tonight, we are focused on progressive sanctification. This is to distinguish from what theologians call definitive sanctification. Definitive sanctification falls under the definition of being set apart for a holy purpose, but Scripture also speaks of a definitive sanctification that includes being made holy. By definitive we mean something that takes place at a moment in time, not something that happens progressively over time. Definitive sanctification has to do with being set free from slavery to sin and being *credited* Jesus’ perfect righteousness. Progressive sanctification has to do with a gradual, ongoing change in our morality- our becoming like Christ and obeying God’s laws. If definitive sanctification is being set free from the slavery to sin, progressive sanctification is the practice of that freedom.

If we were to think of sanctification as a line that stretched across the span of our Christian lives, definitive sanctification would be the pinpoint at the beginning of the line, and progressive sanctification would be the line itself. The point at the end of the line would be our glorification when our earthly bodies are made new and are without sin for all eternity.

It is important to understand definitive sanctification in order to rightly understand progressive sanctification, so I want to spend a few minutes on it before we go any further.

**1 Corinthians 6:11** And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.

This definitive act of God in our sanctification took place with the other gifts of salvation. It is one of the many benefits that comes from our union with Christ.

Sanctification is union with Christ. We cannot have Christ’s record of holiness without Christ. This is true of both definitive and progressive sanctification.

**1 Corinthians 1:30** And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption

In Christ, we have a sanctification credited to us that is already accomplished for us by Christ.

In Romans 6, Paul makes a very clear argument for the fact that our union with Christ is the basis for our sanctification; definitive AND progressive:

**Romans 6:1-14** What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? 2 By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it? 3 Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? 4 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.

5 For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. 6 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. 7 For one who has died has been set free from sin. 8 Now if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. 9 We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. 10 For the death he died he died to sin, once for all, but the life he lives he lives to God. 11 So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.

12 Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body, to make you obey its passions. 13 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. 14 For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace.

The logic of Paul’s argument is simple. The reason we do not continue in sin that grace may abound is that we died to sin. He states this as definitively as the fact of Christ’s death on the Cross. Because Christ died to sin, we died to sin. We have been set free from the lordship of sin and are no longer its slave. Because we are united to Christ, we died as He died, and we live as He lives. This is true of all who are united to Christ by grace through faith.

Now it is also clear from this same passage (and many others) that this freedom from sin, this definitive sanctification, does not mean that we don’t still struggle with sin. If that were the case, it would make no sense for him to say in verse 12, “Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body.” Here again we see the principle at work – because this is true…live this way. Because we have been definitively sanctified (that is cleansed, purified, and set free from the lordship of sin), we must be progressively sanctified, and no longer live in obedience to sin, but instead we should live lives of righteousness unto God.

So now with that distinction being made, let’s look closer at progressive sanctification.

* **Progressive Sanctification**

Our answer first says, “Progressive sanctification is growing in holiness through obedience to the Lordship of Jesus and His word from a right heart.”

In the Romans 6 passage, when Paul asks the rhetorical question in verse 1 (“Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound?”), he is talking about the actual committing of sin. The primary objective in his argument is not just to convey the truths of our being set free from the reign of sin; it is to show how the truth of those arguments should lead to our living lives of moral holiness in our mortal bodies. In other words, the question – “Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound?” is asked for the purpose of showing the importance of progressive sanctification. Because of all that is *spiritually* true of us in our union with Christ, we are to not let sin reign in our *physical* bodies.

Our union with Christ is fundamental to our progressive sanctification. This is incredibly important for us to remember. Otherwise we are likely to begin to think that our sanctification is about us and our achievements. Sinclair Ferguson says this:

This, then is the foundation of sanctification in Reformed theology. It is rooted, not in humanity and their achievement of holiness or sanctification, but in what God has done in Christ, and for us in union with him. Rather than view Christians first and foremost in the micro-cosmic context of their own progress, the Reformed doctrine first of all sets them in the macrocosm of God’s activity in redemptive history. It is seeing oneself in this context that enables the individual Christian to grow in true holiness.

* **By grace, powered by the Holy Spirit**

Our answer says, “By grace, it is a lifelong process powered by the Holy Spirit to change us to become more like Christ.” Let’s consider this from Scripture.

We are to work hard to please God and obey His commands, placing our confidence in the work of Christ, not ourselves, knowing that He is the one giving success to our efforts, causing us to work.

**1 Corinthians 15:10** But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me.

Paul is not boasting in his hard work here; he knows that God’s grace is due the credit and he is boasting in the grace of God. He is saying that God’s grace had a purpose for him and that God accomplished that purpose. This is true humility: Paul is recognizing that he was created for God’s purpose, not his own, and he is able to look at the fruit of his own life as if he were a spectator along with his audience.

He encourages the Philippians to work hard with the same mindset:

**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.

Scripture teaches that holy living should be the natural response to belief in the gospel. Belief in the gospel is the foundation for true sanctification. The Bible is written in a way that constantly points to doctrinal truth as the reason we should live a certain way. Look at:

**Romans 12:1-2** I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.

I appeal to you *therefore…* by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy, not conformed but transformed, living differently, because of what I just said before; that’s why he says therefore. We would need to go all the way back to chapter one for the full context, but the immediate context gets to the heart of it. Look with me at chapter 11, verses 33-36:

**Romans 11:33-36** Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!

34 "For who has known the mind of the Lord,

or who has been his counselor?"

35 "Or who has given a gift to him

that he might be repaid?"

36 For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen.

Paul has just finished 11 chapters of explaining the work of God in salvation and is finally overwhelmed with worship brought on by the contemplation of those truths. He is not only saying that God is worthy to be worshiped; therefore, this is your spiritual act of worship. He is also saying that the truth about your salvation, justification, adoption, and future glorification are *causes* of worship. Not just cause by way of reason, but cause by way of empowering. These truths not only give us a reason to worship God, but because these things are true of us we are ABLE to worship and obey Him.

* **Grow in holiness through obedience**

And this worship is to be expressed by sacrificing our bodies - our physical bodies - our whole lives - unto holiness. It says this is your *spiritual* act of worship. Many people think that being spiritual just means something non-physical, only something mystical that takes place in the invisible realm of our hearts and minds. But Paul is teaching us here that true spiritual worship involves all of our being: our heart, our mind, AND our physical bodies. We present all of ourselves, including our physical bodies, as holy and acceptable by bringing them into line with God’s revealed will- His law, particularly His moral law.

**1 Thessalonians 4:3-4, 7-8** For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from sexual immorality; 4 that each one of you know how to control his own body in holiness and honor …7 For God has not called us for impurity, but in holiness. 8 Therefore whoever disregards this, disregards not man but God, who gives his Holy Spirit to you.

**1 Peter 1:13-16** 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. As obedient children, do not be conformed to the passions of your former ignorance, but as he who called you is holy, you also ***be holy in all your conduct***, since it is written, “You shall be holy, for I am holy.”

“Be holy in all your conduct.” This sanctification, this holiness, is referring to our moral actions, our conduct. If we are living life with no real transformation in the way we actually think, speak, feel, and act, if it is not evident externally by our conduct, if we are comfortable continuing to disobey God’s law because we believe His grace is there for us to abound in our sin, then we are disregarding God.

True saving faith leads to true sanctification.

Paul’s appeal for us to be transformed in Romans chapter 12 goes on for two and a half chapters, as he expounds even more specifically about how we should live our lives in light of this truth, laying out the marks of a true Christian. He gives examples and instruction on how this transformation unto holiness affects all aspects of our lives including our head, heart, and hands.

There is a list below the catechism answer describing these aspects of sanctification.

**Being redeemed, we progressively become more Christ-like:**

Head: Knowledge, Understanding, Wisdom, Worldview

Heart: Attitude, Emotions, Motives, Feelings, Desires

Hands: Actions, Relationships, Service, Sacrifice

Sanctification is not just changing the way we behave, though it definitely includes that. It involves our thinking and our emotions. You cannot have true change in one area without the other two being equally affected.

Jesus said that from the overflow of the heart, the mouth speaks. Our words and actions reveal our thoughts, or what we believe, and our beliefs dictate our emotions and actions.

It all starts with the head. What we think and believe is the ultimate determiner of how we feel and how we act. This is why the transformation of these areas is brought on by the renewal of our minds. When the Holy Spirit gives us new spiritual birth, it is the truth of the gospel -- the good news of who God is, what He is like, and what He has done to save sinners such as us that fills our hearts with love for Him and causes us to live sacrificial lives of obedience for Him. Our previously sinful way of thinking, in which we lived according to our own understanding – our own ignorant way of thinking - is sanctified and made holy, by believing the gospel. Our previously wicked hearts, with affections toward created things, are sanctified by seeing Jesus as the perfect and all-satisfying treasure of our hearts. This new affection toward God is being sanctified as we grow in our love for Him by growing in our knowledge of Him.

The Holy Spirit causing in us this love for God then fuels the sanctification of our hands. These previously wicked hands that were used to serve our own selfish desires are sanctified to be used in service to God. We are compelled to serve Him, because we love Him and want to please Him. It has nothing to do with trying to earn His favor; it is simply the Holy Spirit empowered response of our being loved by Him.

Without the work of the Spirit in us, we would never be transformed, because the words of truth would never change our thinking. It is the Spirit who opens our blind eyes and deaf ears to the truth of the gospel. Without the work of the Spirit, we would still be spiritually dead, we would never believe with saving faith, and our affections would not be turned from sin to God.

Just as we saw in the Ordo Salutis (the Order of Salvation), it is very important for us to understand the work of God in each step in our salvation, as well as the importance of knowing that there is an order. In other words, it is critical that we remember that by the time we begin working on our sanctification, we have already been justified… not just partly… completely! Progressive Sanctification is not adding to or completing or maintaining any of the benefits that have already been secured for us in Christ.

One of the main errors of thinking that hinders Christian growth is a confusion between sanctification and justification. Speaking of the difference between the two, AW Pink states:

Though absolutely inseparable, yet these two great blessings of Divine grace are quite distinct. In sanctification something is actually imparted to us, in justification it is only imputed. Justification is based entirely upon the work Christ wrought for us, sanctification is principally a work wrought in us. Justification respects its object in a legal sense and terminates in a relative change — a deliverance from punishment, a right to the reward; sanctification regards its object in a moral sense, and terminates in an experimental change both in character and conduct — imparting a love for God, a capacity to worship Him acceptably, and a fitness for Heaven. Justification is by a righteousness without us, sanctification is by a holiness wrought in us. Justification is by Christ as Priest, and has regard to the penalty of sin; sanctification is by Christ as King, and has regard to the dominion of sin: the former cancels its damning power, the latter delivers from its reigning power. ~ A.W. Pink

If we confuse justification and sanctification, it can lead to thinking that our holiness is imputed to us in the same way that justification is, which leads to the notion that there is nothing for me to do in regards to my sanctification, that there is no striving for holiness or battle to wage against sin. When taken to its extreme, it leads to antinomianism. Antinomianism is a theological term made up of the Greek words “anti,” meaning against, and “nomos,” meaning law, so…against the law. It is the heresy that as Christians we are not required to obey any of God’s laws, not even the moral laws.

Basically, it’s the idea that Christ has fulfilled all of the law for us, so we are not required to obey it.

The other way that justification is confused with sanctification is when a person thinks that their sanctification is contributing to their justification, that their obedience to the laws of God are improving their standing before God or are required BEFORE they are truly justified and forgiven. This is legalism, or at least one form of it. It can become an unbearable weight due to the fact that our sanctification is a lifelong process that is never fully completed in this life. Part of true sanctification is a growing awareness of just how deep our sin runs, so if we are thinking that our sanctification is contributing to our justification, our imperfect progress can become hopelessly discouraging.

So we have two extremes; antinomianism - a disregard for the law, and legalism - a strict adherence to the law as a way to point to one’s own merit in justification or sanctification. Neither of these ways of thinking are biblical. In fact, they are not really opposites. They are really just two sides of the same coin. They are both rooted in a distrust in God’s grace as found in the gospel. In previous teaching we’ve shown abundant scriptural support for a right understanding of justification by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. Ephesians 2:8-9 has been referred to almost weekly to affirm this truth, but verse 10 goes on to speak of our sanctification:

**Ephesians 2:8-10** For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, 9 not a result of works, so that no one may boast. 10 For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus *for good works*, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.

We have previously learned that the ultimate purpose for which we were created is to glorify God, so when we see places in Scripture that speak of other specific purposes for our existence, we know that they are pen-ultimate. In other words, based on the teaching of the whole of Scripture, we could read this verse as, “We are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which serve the ultimate purpose of glorifying Him.” Even those who are not saved still serve the purpose of bringing glory to God (particularly through God’s justice). But it is clear from Scripture that their acts of disobedience are not called good works; they are still evil. Good works are good, not just because they bring God glory, but because they bring Him pleasure. God uses evil for His ultimate glory, but evil does not please Him.

So the good works spoken of here are more than just the passive work of glorifying God; it is speaking of active good works that have been prepared for us to actually *do*.

Jesus told the rich young ruler, “No one is good except God alone” (Mark 10:18). So the only good that we can do is that which is wrought by God and in line with His character. Jesus modeled His goodness to us through His perfect obedience to the law of God. He loved God and His neighbor perfectly, even unto death. We are sanctified unto good works as we are conformed into the image of Jesus. Growing in our love for God by beholding the beauty of Jesus, makes us want to be more like Him, to be in Him, to experience our oneness with Him, and that leads us to imitate Him by obeying the law of God, not perfectly, but in growing success.

There’s a once popular slogan that says “Christians aren’t perfect, just forgiven.” That’s a mostly true statement, but it can convey the wrong idea that the only difference between Christians and non-Christians is their legal standing before God, but that’s only a part of the difference. We aren’t just forgiven; we are also sanctified and are being sanctified. The difference is not just an invisible presence of Jesus in our lives that we make known by our confession. The difference is also visible in the transformation that has taken place by the power of the gospel. The difference is seen in the new way of living that we have taken up in our repentance from sin.

Sanctification is a benefit of salvation. A benefit! I’m afraid that too many of us, and I know I am guilty of this at times, see sanctification as something burdensome. Sanctification should never be seen as the painful process of learning to be obedient, as much as it is the process of fully enjoying the benefits of being one with Christ.

We say that wisdom is the skill for living; it is the application of true knowledge. Sanctification is much the same: It is the application of holiness. Wisdom is wise living; progressive sanctification is holy living. It’s a real experience of victory over sin. It is knowing what pleases God and doing it instead of giving in to our fleshly desire to please ourselves.

Let’s move on to our next Question:

**Q98. What means does the Holy Spirit use to mature Christians?**

In accordance with His sovereign power, the Holy Spirit uses means such as the Bible, prayer, preaching, discipleship, trials, Christian fellowship and accountability in the process of maturing Christians.

**Bible** - Be taught biblically. Read the Bible, hear it, and remember it. Know sound doctrine.

**Prayer** - Pour out our hearts to God in praise, thanksgiving, confession of sin, and express our requests to Him while submitting to His sovereign will.

**Preaching** - The word of God taught rightly in the context of a local church.

**Discipleship** - Follow and learn from more mature Christians and do the work of disciple-making ourselves: call people to saving faith, then train them in sound doctrine and how to live as imitators of Christ.

**Trials** - Suffer the challenges in life with joy, including overcoming our own sin and other realities of an ungodly world.

**Fellowship** - Spend quality time with, invite exhortation from, and be accountable to Christians, giving special honor to elders/pastors.

I don’t have time to teach on all these but I want to expand at least a little bit on each one.

* **THE BIBLE**

The first and **primary** means the Holy Spirit uses to mature us in sanctification is the word of God: the Bible. From His word we learn that He has also given us the gifts of prayer, suffering, and fellowship with other believers to help us grow in our maturity.

**2 Timothy 3:16-17** All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.

This passage teaches us that the Bible is authoritative, meaning that as God’s word it has the final word; everything else submits to this authority. This is incredibly important for our sanctification, because without the authority of God’s written word, we cannot know God’s will for us with certainty. We would be left to trusting in our own flawed judgment or the judgment of someone else whose judgment is just as flawed. Our flesh will always tempt us to trust in our own experiences, desires, and understanding, so we need to be completely submitted to God’s word as the authority that we will obey.

It also teaches us through inference that the Bible is without error, because it is breathed out by God. It says ALL Scripture, so we do not need to try to reinterpret Scripture to compensate for any deficiencies it might have, because it doesn’t have any deficiencies. It is heartbreaking to see how many professing Christians are giving up on the inerrancy of Scripture and finding ways to say that the Bible was written by men who did not have the necessary awareness of modern complexities in order to speak to them. So not only are they saying that Scripture is errant, but that it is also insufficient, that we need more information in order to truly know God’s will for our lives.

The so-called social justice movement is just one of the most recent examples of how a biblically uninformed pursuit of good works can actually lead us away from a Christ-like pursuit of holiness. The concept of promoting and working for justice within society is in fact a biblical one, as is love, forgiveness, and truth. But all of these concepts lose their biblical legitimacy when they are redefined and promoted as being compatible with un-biblical ideologies. So, in the case of the so-called social justice movement that is being promoted by the secular mainstream, they have not only redefined the meaning of justice in a way that is void of the biblical definition of justice, they have also redefined the definition of sin in such a way that it actually contradicts and opposes the very gospel itself. You can’t get any further from Christ-likeness than by actively working against the truth He came to testify to, and the work He came to accomplish.

Adhering to the Bible as our primary source of sanctification means more than just obeying the moral commandment for us to love God and our neighbor, it means acknowledging that the Bible has much to say about HOW we are to love God, and HOW we are to love our neighbor. It gives us all of the necessary information we need in order to rightly obey God’s commands. It’s lazy and arrogant to believe that we are able to know and obey God’s word by our own understanding.

**Psalm 119:33-34** Teach me, O Lord, **the way** of your statutes; (not just the statutes, but the application of them)

and I will keep it to the end.

34 Give me understanding, that I may keep your law

and observe it with my whole heart.

Psalm 119 is the longest Psalm in the Psalter and is longer than several other books in the Bible. Every verse is a tribute to God’s law, extolling its beauty and benefits to those who love and obey it. What becomes clear when you read it is that when the psalmist refers to God’s law, he is including every word that comes from the mouth of God. I wish we had time to read the whole thing together. I encourage you to read it and consider the genuineness of the devotion it took for the psalmist to come up with 176 unique verses expressing his love for God’s commandments. As you read, make it your prayer that God would give you the same zeal and passion to know and obey His Word.

If we are going to grow in holiness and purity, we must not allow ourselves to neglect the inerrancy, infallibility, and authoritative sufficiency of God’s holy word. If we do that, we have lost our only sure and solid means of knowing God’s will for our lives.

That is why the word of God is of primary importance for our sanctification. The Holy Spirit uses the Bible – the written Word of God, to shine the light of truth in the dark places of our own lives, revealing all of the evil ways we are prone to think, feel, and act.

**Hebrews 4:12** For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two- edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.

Not only that, but it also shows us what true good works are. It reveals the ugliness of sin and the beauty of righteousness.

Now, while the Bible is completely sufficient to equip us for every good work, it is the Bible that teaches us that God uses other means in conjunction with His word to accomplish His work of sanctifying us.

* **PRAYER** is another equally important and necessary means of our sanctification.

Again, you see this modeled in Psalm 119. The Psalmist is not just proclaiming his devotion and love for God’s law, he is praying and pleading for God to work in accordance with His word.

**Psalm 119:169-170** Let my cry come before you, O Lord;

 give me understanding according to your word!

170 Let my plea come before you;

 deliver me according to your word.

In prayer, we are responding to God’s word and humbly acknowledging our dependence upon the Holy Spirit to teach us. There is a reverence for the fact that the infinite, unfathomable King of all creation has spoken to us, and at the same time, there is a confidence in the truth that God **has spoken**, and that His word is unchanging and trustworthy. In our prayers we are not demanding God to do something according to our will, we are expressing our desire and confidence for God to act according to His will, as revealed in His word. The more we know God’s word, the more confident we will be in our prayers. And the more we pray, the more we will grow in our knowledge of God’s word.

**James 1:5** If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him.

**Matthew 7:7-11** "Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. 8 For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened. 9 Or which one of you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone? 10 Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a serpent? 11 If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him!”

Don’t miss out on the incredible gift of God working in our lives through the means of prayer. We know that it is God’s will that we be sanctified, and we know that God will grant us good gifts according to His will, so we can be absolutely sure that He will give us spiritual growth when we are continually asking for it according to His word.

* **PREACHING**

Preaching is another blessed means that God uses to sanctify His people.

**Ephesians 4:11-12** And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, 12 to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, 13 until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ…

One of the common attributes of all the offices mentioned is that they all proclaim the word of God, albeit in different contexts. The primary way that the saints are equipped for the work of ministry, etc. is by the preaching of God’s word. Sitting under the preaching of biblically faithful pastors and teachers also helps us to grow in a way that promotes unity within the body of Christ. By listening to the same scripture passages and hearing the same sermon, the table is set for us to continue encouraging and exhorting one another as we mutually seek to apply what we’ve heard.

Now, it needs to be said that not all preaching is beneficial, ONLY preaching that is subordinate to, and in alignment with the Bible is. Sadly, there are far too many professing Christians who are sitting under so-called preaching, not because it is helping to conform them to the image of Christ, but because it conforms to the kind of self-help and self-centered message they want to hear. Their goal in listening to these self-improvement sermons is not to glorify Christ, but to glorify themselves.

Faithful bible preaching will promote biblical discernment, and should fuel our hunger for the Word. We are blessed to be in a church that faithfully preaches the Word of God every single week.

* **DISCIPLESHIP**

Next is discipleship.

**Matthew 28:19-20** 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, 20 teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.

Discipleship is about disciples making disciples; specifically, disciples of Jesus making other disciples of Jesus. And the first command for a disciple is that they be baptized in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Water baptism symbolizes our definitive sanctification - our Union with Christ. Following baptism, a disciple is to be taught to observe/obey all of Christ’s commands – to be progressively sanctified.

Every one of us who follows Christ is a disciple, but the more one devotes themselves to the discipleship process, the more one will become like Christ. The progression of sanctification increases as the commitment to learn increases. It’s the basic principle of sowing and reaping. It’s not about you performing and being the “best disciple.” It’s about making the most of the means that God has prescribed as a way the Holy Spirit will make us more holy.

The more areas of your life that you open yourself up to other mature Christians, for their counsel and input the more you will experience the holistic work of sanctification in your life. If we don’t allow others to truly know us and our struggles, they have no way to encourage us and hold us accountable in those things.

* **TRIALS**

God’s good gifts don’t always come in pretty packages. Scripture is prolific in teaching that trials and suffering are used by God for our good.

**Philippians 1:29** For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake,

**1 Peter 1:6-7** In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, 7 so that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ.

**James 1:2-4** Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, 3 for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. 4 And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.

**Romans 5:3-5** Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.

As Christians, all of our suffering is unto Christ. We have a tendency to think of suffering for Christ as being only when our suffering is directly related to suffering from persecution, but that would mean that many Christians have never really had to suffer for Christ.

As Americans, our God given right to worship is acknowledged and protected by law under our Constitution. Many American Christians have become so conditioned to view our freedoms as sacred, that they are more concerned about the government’s protection of those freedoms, then they are with their freedom in Christ, to live for Him regardless of the consequences. We have to be very careful not to act as though our ability to joyfully worship God and to live lives of holiness could ever be threatened by the actions of another, even the government.

The purity of the church has always grown the most in times and places of increased persecution. We have not yet experienced real persecution for our faith, not like the kind many of our brothers and sisters in Christ around the world are facing, where they are being, discriminated against, imprisoned, tortured, and even killed for proclaiming the name of Jesus.

We should not be so quick to complain about Christian persecution in America, but we should also not make the mistake of thinking that the suffering I experience when I lose my job, or have my stuff stolen, or get sick with the flu, or even when I stub my toe, that these things have no relation to suffering for Christ. It may seem silly, but even smashing my finger with a hammer is suffering for Christ when I endure it as a Christian. That means I don’t allow my circumstances to dictate my heart or my actions. Instead of feeling sorry for myself and angry at the seeming injustice that has happened to me, I embrace my suffering as the God-appointed means He is using to strengthen my faith and to conform me more into the image of His Son.

When I endure as a Christian, I seek to exalt Christ by pointing to Him as my joy and my treasure, and I see not only the joy that I gain from experiencing God’s comfort through my suffering, but I experience the joy that comes from the maturity that is produced in me.

And then there is

* **CHRISTIAN FELLOWSHIP AND ACCOUNTABILITY**.

If we neglect this one, it is highly unlikely that we will ever experience any real sanctification. Again, this is not minimizing the sufficiency of Scripture; it’s emphasizing the importance of obeying Scripture’s teaching.

**Acts 2:42** And they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.

**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 3:13** But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called “today,” that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.

The need for Christian fellowship is not just about having a humble willingness to receive counsel and correction from others. It’s about being intentional to make sure that the people you are receiving counsel from and influencing you are actually Christians, giving you Christian counsel that is helping you to grow in Christ likeness. Christians are commanded to encourage, teach, admonish, and rebuke one another in love. While un-believers might occasionally offer some good practical advice, they will never be able to give wise counsel because you cannot have wisdom without the fear of the Lord.

**1 Corinthians 15:33** Do not be deceived: "Bad company ruins good morals."

The company you keep will have an impact on your character. This doesn’t mean that we should avoid relationships with un-believers, but we must be intentional in how our relationships are serving our efforts to live for the glory of God.

Christian fellowship is an awesome gift from God. Our fellowship with God is magnified in our fellowship with one another.

Christ died for our sins in order to restore us to fellowship with God. We cannot have fellowship with God and not have fellowship with one another.

**1 John 1:7a** But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another…

And vice versa:

**Matthew 18:20** For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them."

As we gather together in Christ’s name – in accordance with who He is – in accordance with His word, as we practice the one anothers that Christ has commanded, there is a special manifestation of Christ’s presence among us.

Besides the joy of fellowship that comes from being adopted brothers and sisters in the one eternal family of God, fellowship gives us the opportunity to put our love for one another on display. It is a practice ground for our sanctification.

Notice as well the note on fellowship below this answer in your handout. It says, “Exhortation from and accountability to Christians, **giving special honor to elders/pastors**.”

This is an important point, because God made it an important point. He decreed that godly leaders have a special role in sanctification through fellowship.

**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.

It is to our own benefit that we show honor to the leaders in the church. They will be held accountable for the watch they keep over our souls. This is a great blessing to us that God has given leaders to the church who are committed to our spiritual growth.

Having brothers and sisters who will encourage us in our struggles, teach and correct us in our thinking, and rebuke us in our stubbornness and sin promotes the beautiful fruit of spiritual growth. Praise God for the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit among us! I could bring up person after person to share how they have grown in ways they could have never imaged since entering into real, accountable fellowship. They’d tell you how they had no idea of the blessing of it until they were in it and grown by it. God’s doing glorious work in many of you through this God ordained means of sanctification.

Finally, we must remember all of this is, as our answer states, “In accordance with His sovereign power.” God is doing the work of sanctification in us. By His sovereign power, using the means He sovereignly decreed. Praise be to God for His ongoing, transforming grace at work in us. When we obey and grow, He gets the glory.

And now let me excuse you all to your groups by praying these words from:

**Hebrews 13:20-21** Now may the God of peace who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, equip you with everything good that you may do his will, working in us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen.