

Understanding God's Work in You

Romans 8:28-29

We have been talking about going deeper with God all summer, and last week I mentioned that in order to experience that, you have to live with an awareness of his presence and his work in your life and you have to live a life that is in tune with his character and will. We talked about being aware of his presence last week and the awesome reality that when we are born again and become a Christian, God actually sends his Spirit to dwell in us. We are now his temple. He is in us – present at every moment and in every situation. So we need to train ourselves to live in that awareness.

But he isn't just present in us; the Bible is clear he's actually working in us. Paul says in Philippians 1:6: *"And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ."* He also says in Philippians 2:13 *"for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure."* This morning we're going to talk about the work God is doing. It's awesome to know that God is in us, but why is he in us? And what is he doing?

He isn't just sitting there and going along for the ride as we journey through life; he's moving us in a direction. And if we're going to grow deeper in our relationship with him, we have to know and understand what that direction is, or we're going to be confused much of the time, frustrated in our relationship with him, and likely in conflict with what he's doing. And I think we see a lot of that happening in Christianity today.

It would be a little bit like if you had a personal trainer to help you get healthy but never found out what they wanted you to do. They have goals, a diet plan, and workouts for you, but if you never find out what they are, you're going to be confused and frustrated. You might come up with your own workouts and diet, and try different things that make sense to you, but they could actually be detrimental to what your trainer wants you to do.

The same can be true in your relationship with God. What is he doing? Well, God hasn't left us in the dark. His work in us is not supposed to be a big secret or mystery. The Bible tells us what he's doing and as we grow in our knowledge and understanding of him there will be greater clarity. It's not that we're going to understand all the answers to everything going on in our lives

because our view is limited and there are going to be things that don't make sense. But the Bible is clear about what he is aiming for and how he wants us to pursue that goal.

So we're going to talk about what God is working toward in us, how he brings that about in our lives, and then highlight some faulty assumptions people have that lead to confusion, frustration, and conflict with what God is doing.

What is God doing in your life? The Bible says a lot about his work in us, but I believe all of it ties together under one overarching aim. Paul writes about it in several places. I want to start by looking at Romans 8:28-29: *"And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. ²⁹ For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers."*

Verse 28 is a wonderful promise we often lay hold of, especially when we're going through difficult times. It's reassuring to know that God uses all things, even bad things and works them together for our good. But we also have to make sure we understand what "good" means, because if we think it means happiness and prosperity, we're going to be really confused and frustrated. Paul makes it easy because he describes what "good" is in vs. 29 – the good that God is working toward in our lives is that we would be conformed to the image of Christ... In my understanding of Scripture, this is the overarching aim of the work God is doing in our lives – conforming us into the image of Christ.

We see this in other passages as well. In 2 Cor. 3:18 Paul writes: *"And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit."* In Ephesians 4:11-13 he writes: *"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."* In Galatians 4:19 he says, *"my little children, for whom I am again in the anguish of childbirth until Christ is formed in you!"* The repeated teaching in Scripture is that the aim of the work that God is doing in our lives is to conform us into the image of Christ.

I think it can be helpful to understand why this is if you back up and look at the beginning of human history. If you think back to when mankind was created, it says in Genesis 1:26-27: *“Then God said, ‘Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.’”*²⁷ So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.” We were created to be God’s image bearers – bearing forth his image throughout the earth, bringing glory to the invisible Creator wherever we live.

But then what? Genesis 3 records man’s fall into sin. Instead of walking in harmony with God and bearing his image as we were created to do, we chose to turn away from him and go our own way instead. And so sin entered the world – it separated us from God and marred his image in us. And sin grew and spread throughout all mankind, corrupting us, and keeping us from fulfilling our divine image-bearing purpose. That’s what we were born into.

And that brings us to God’s plan of redemption. By his grace and mercy, God has provided a way through Christ’s life, death, and resurrection for our sins to be washed away and for us to be reconciled to God. Through faith in him, God unites us to Christ and all he’s done and he begins to remove the destructive effects of sin and restore us to our ultimate purpose – to be image bearers of God for his glory throughout all the earth.

So salvation isn’t just about getting out of hell; it’s about becoming who God created us to be. When God saves you, he does all kinds of things to restore you to your ultimate image-bearing purpose. He cleanses you from sin, he gives you a new heart and a new spirit, he puts his Spirit in you so that you will walk in his ways. Why? So that you will be conformed into the image of Christ. That’s the good work that God is doing in you – a work that he will bring to completion on the day of Christ. He is working all things together to bring that about in you so that you will be transformed from one degree of glory to the next until Christ is formed in you and you attain to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.

This is the work that God is doing in in your life if you have been reborn and you’ve chosen to put your faith in him. It’s a work that’s referred to as “sanctification” in Scripture. That’s a good word to become familiar with.

Sanctification is the process of transformation that God is doing in you to free you from the destructive influences of sin and make you more like Christ. So when you read about sanctification in Scripture, you're reading about God's work in you to make you more like Christ.

Paul writes about it in 1 Thessalonians 5:23 *"Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ."* This is a work that involves every part of your being. God is transforming you to become like Christ in every way – spirit, soul, body – thoughts, affections, behaviors, mission and will. That's why when Jesus was asked what the greatest commandment is, he said in Matthew 22:37: *"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind."* God isn't just looking for you to follow rules or believe in Jesus; he's working in you to become completely devoted to him in every area of life – just like Jesus.

Now, as you begin to see more clearly the work that God is doing in you, it's vitally important to see that it's not just him that's doing the work. Sanctification is a cooperative effort, not a passive one. God has done and is doing everything to equip and empower you to become like Christ, but he has also called you and is expecting and requiring you to join in that effort. You see that all throughout Scripture. 1 Thessalonians 4:1-3 says, *"Finally, then, brothers, we ask and urge you in the Lord Jesus, that as you received from us how you ought to walk and to please God, just as you are doing, that you do so more and more."*² For you know what instructions we gave you through the Lord Jesus.³ For this is the will of God, your sanctification." Philippians 2:12-13 says, *"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, ¹³ for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure."*

You and I are to fully participate in the work that God is doing. That's what all the commands in Scripture are for. God has given them to us so that we can become more like Christ. God is always calling us to become like Jesus. 2 Corinthians 5:17 says, *"Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come."* And because of that, we are to participate in putting off the old and putting on the new. In Ephesians 4:20-24 Paul calls the new believers to no longer live as unbelievers because they are involved in every kind of evil. He says *"But that*

is not the way you learned Christ!—²¹ assuming that you have heard about him and were taught in him, as the truth is in Jesus, ²² to put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, ²³ and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, ²⁴ and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.”

God is working in us to make us more like Christ, and we participate and cooperate with him in the work that he's doing. So, you don't have to wonder what God is up to in your life. The Bible tells you what he's doing. You may not understand all the details and how everything fits into that exactly because God sees way beyond what we can see, but you can know that whatever is going on is something that God will use to make you more like Christ. As you learn to live with this awareness and approach your journey of life through this lens it will alleviate a lot of confusion and frustration and open the door for you to go deeper in fellowship with God.

Now, I want to take a little time to talk about how God does this work of sanctification because I think this is where we face some confusion and frustration as well. It would be nice if the process of putting off the old self and putting on the new was nice and easy, and that we wouldn't have any resistance to it. But the reality is that there are some aspects of the old self that we don't really want to part with, or aren't aware of, or are so deeply embedded that they are very difficult to uproot. Likewise, there are several characteristics of Christ that are very difficult to put on because they do not go along with our natural desires or tendencies. We don't realize how much sin has influenced us and marred the image of Christ in us and most of us would be really surprised at how much we need to change. God doesn't wait around for us to gain that clarity. He is gentle and patient, but he starts chipping away whether we're ready or not.

First, let's start with the ways God works that are more pleasant and appealing. These are the things we've talked about this summer. God works to make us more like Christ through our own habits of spiritual growth. As we meditate on Scripture, spend time in prayer and worship, God meets with us and opens our eyes to areas in which we need transformation. He convicts us of sin. He shows us what Christ is like through the word. By studying Scripture and engaging in prayer and worship we are imitating the very things that Christ did. So there is tremendous benefit to spending time with God every day. God

works through that time and when we make the commitment to seeking him, we are participating in the work he is doing.

Another generally pleasant way God carries out his work is through the fellowship of believers. There are so many blessings and ways that God brings about transformation in our lives when we are engaged in Christian community and the ministry of the church. The proverb says, “As iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another.” We can teach each other, encourage each other, hold each other accountable, pray for one another, serve one another, minister to one another with our spiritual gifts. We can lovingly confront one another. And it’s when we engage in community, especially with all of our differences, that many of our old-self, sinful tendencies flare up and come to the surface where we can see them and repent. Selfishness, anger, impatience, greed – these all get stirred up when you’re part of a church family! Rather than avoiding those who stir them up, God wants our interactions in Christian community to transform us.

So these are ways God works that I would say are more preferable. But sometimes he does need to use more difficult or painful measures to conform us into the image of Christ because there are areas of our old self that are deeply rooted and we just can’t see them and there are characteristics of Christ that won’t be formed in us in any other way. So we also have to be willing to endure pain and suffering and discipline in our lives, because the Bible is clear God uses them to make us like Christ.

Paul shares his own example in 2 Corinthians 12 of how God used suffering in his life – a thorn in the flesh – to make him more like Christ. The apostles wrote in several places about God’s good purposes in our suffering. James 1:2-4 says, “*Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, ³for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. ⁴And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.*” Romans 5:3-5 says, “*Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, ⁴and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, ⁵and 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.*”

I’m so glad that God doesn’t waste our suffering but is able to use it for our good – to make us more like Christ. Suffering disentangles us from worldly

pursuits, uproots deeply embedded sin and produces Christlike character that we otherwise wouldn't experience. So when you're going through suffering of various kinds, that doesn't mean God is absent or neglecting you. He's actually using those things to make you more like Christ. Rather than just trying to escape it, we need to ask God to help us see how he wants us to grow through it.

But sometimes bad things don't just happen, sometimes they happen because of consequences for sin. God uses suffering for the purpose of discipline. But that discipline is always for our good – again, to make us more like Christ. Hebrews 12 states this most clearly. Verse 6 says, *“For the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives.”* And verses 9-11 say: *“Besides this, we have had earthly fathers who disciplined us and we respected them. Shall we not much more be subject to the Father of spirits and live? ¹⁰ For they disciplined us for a short time as it seemed best to them, but he disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness. ¹¹ For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.”*

Whether it's your own practice of seeking God, engaging in the blessings of Christian community, going through suffering, or facing the Lord's discipline, God is working in all things to conform us into the image of Christ. We don't need to be confused or frustrated or wander aimlessly or go the wrong direction. We can work together with him in this great work he's doing and as we do, we will be able to grow deeper and deeper.

Now, to close, I want to mention some false ideas and assumptions people have about the work God is doing in our lives so that you can avoid these things and the frustration and confusion that go with them.

- God is not working in you to make you happy. Your happiness or lack of it is not an indicator of how God is working. You can be happy because of the work God is doing in you, but you can also face suffering. You can also be happy at times because of sinful things. God's goal isn't to make you feel happy; it's to make you like Christ, and sometimes that means happiness or suffering.
- God is not working in you to make your life more comfortable and easy. You will probably find life to be more comfortable and easy in certain ways when you turn away from destructive patterns of sin and begin to follow

the way of Christ. But things are going to be difficult as well. Becoming like Christ involves self-denial, sacrifice, mourning and discomfort at times.

- God is not working in you to exalt you. His goal is not to make you successful at sports, school, or your job. He's not aiming to build your kingdom or make your story great to that people are super impressed with you. He's working to form Christ in you so Christ is exalted and people are amazed by him. "I must decrease; he must increase." (John the Baptist)
- God is not working in you because he thinks you're just a worthless, lowly, wretched worm with no value. He isn't disgusted with you – he delights in you and has chosen to work with you and partner with you in the journey of sanctification.

There are other faulty ideas and aims but these are the ones I've seen that come to mind.

In order to go deeper with God we need to be aware of his presence in our lives and learn to live in that awareness, but we also need to be aware that he's working and calls us to partner with him as he transforms us into the image of Christ. Next week I want to begin talking about how we can live the kind of lives that are in tune with the work God is doing so that we welcome his work and his presence and experience deeper fellowship with him.